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## **The rise and fall of the GNVQ**

A study of the changing relationship between young people and vocational qualifications at the start of the twenty first-century

A thesis submission for a Ph.D.  
Open University School of Education  
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## Abstract

This research project examines the changing relationship between young people and educational qualifications in England and Wales, at the start of the twenty-first century. It assesses the reasons for increased participation in post-16 education and in particular, for the growth of full-time vocational qualifications such as the General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ).

The thesis is in three sections. By reviewing the literature on the changing nature of work, economy, class and the implications for education, chapter 1 sets a context and provides the major theoretical component. While it concludes for example, that claims about the rise of a 'post-Fordist' economy are unsubstantiated, it does argue that changes in the economic order have resulted in new developments in the occupational structure and in occupational recruitment and that these have been important factors behind the increased participation in education. It also argues that increased participation in education has required the reorganisation of learning and the construction of a new 'settlement'. Vocational qualifications like GNVQ have been integral to this.

Section two, provides a critical history of GNVQ. It traces its origins in the new vocationalism of the 1980s and its more immediate influences, in particular the thinking of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications. It argues that if vocational qualifications have been designed to 'cool out' a new generation of students, the evolution of GNVQ into a vocational A-level, has also been a consequence of students using vocational qualifications as a way of moving up the educational system.

Section three centres on a case study of students on Advanced GNVQ courses in school sixth forms. It examines how students perceive their course and locates the ambiguities of their educational careers in the theoretical framework and policy contradictions outlined in section one and two.

## Contents

Preface

### Part One

#### The changing context of qualification reform

- Chapter One.      Page 21      Education, economy and class recomposition.  
A review of the literature.
- Chapter Two      Page 64      Vocational education and the State.

### Part Two

#### GNVQ a critical history

- Chapter Three      Page 92      The origins of GNVQ
- Chapter Four      Page 117      From GNVQ to VCE.
- Chapter Five      Page 157      The story of key skills.
- Chapter Six      Page 177      Breaking the logjam? Tomlinson and  
qualification reform.

### Part Three

#### Students and their courses

#### The *Inner London* and *Anglia* case studies

- Chapter Seven      Page 197      *Inner London*: from school to university.
- Chapter Eight      Page 242      The limits to 'drifting up'
- Chapter Nine      Page 262      Conclusion.
- Appendices      Page 278
- References      Page 300

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'Twenty years of schooling an' they put ya on the day shift'

Bob Dylan  
Subterranean Homesick Blues  
1965

## Preface

This research project examines the changing relationship between young people and educational qualifications in England and Wales, at the start of the twenty-first century. It assesses the reasons behind the increased participation in post-16 education and in particular for the growth of qualifications such as the Advanced level General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ), created as a vocational alternative to GCE A-levels.

The period during which this research was undertaken has been a turbulent one for anyone involved in post-16 education. During this time, the structure of the GNVQ was to change considerably. Not only has the title of the research project been amended several times, but also additionally, plans have been rewritten and chapters re arranged. More significantly, new issues have arisen and ideas have had to be reformulated.

As a result of the upheavals that have taken place in post-16 education and the fact that the new post-16 qualifications framework *Curriculum 2000* has been in a continued state of crisis, my particular interest in the GNVQ has given way to a more general concern about the role played by various types of qualifications in differentiating students during what is now a much more prolonged transition from full-time education to work. I have become clearer about the particular contradictions of vocational qualifications, contradictions that are central in explaining the subsequent 'academic drift' of the GNVQ and its transformation into a Vocational Certificate of Education (a vocational A-level) from September 2000.



Though there is occasional reference to international developments, this thesis is restricted to an analysis of qualifications in England and Wales. Following Green, Wolf and Leney (1999), I would argue that even though problems faced by governments in this country are faced by those elsewhere, there still remain particular national differences in the nature of the qualifications structure and in for example, the particular significance given to vocational education compared with industrial training. The research has also been largely concerned with the Advanced level GNVQ, rather than the Foundation and Intermediate levels of the qualification, for it is at Advanced level where the increase in student numbers has been most significant and where the contradictions of the qualification are most visible.

### **Part One. The changing context of education**

The research begins by examining the arguments that changes in the nature of education, particularly the introduction of vocational courses at post-16, are a reflection of more general changes in work and economy at the beginning of the twenty first century. It constitutes a literature review and seeks to provide a theoretical context.

Within the sociology of education for example, the most forceful arguments concerning the way education 'corresponds' with the needs of the economy, have been found in the work of Bowles and Gintis (1976). The function of capitalist schooling is, Bowles and Gintis argue, to ensure the reproduction of the capitalist division of labour. According to Bowles and Gintis, this takes place through the reproduction of different personality traits, for different positions in the capitalist division of labour.

Bowles and Gintis were to be the target of heavy criticism from those hostile to Marxist analysis, as well as from many within the Marxist tradition itself (Cole, *ed.* 1988). However interest in 'correspondence theory,' has been rekindled as a result of the emergence of 'post Fordist' theories of the economy (Hickox and Moore, 1992). At the heart of the post-Fordist claim, is the argument that there has been a move from the post-war Fordist system of production, a process based on fragmented and standardised work practices, to a production system that requires more flexible styles of production, greater creativity, more flexibility and an increase in skill levels amongst the workforce.

### **Post-Fordism, changes in production and changes in learning**

Chapter I examines the general assumptions behind post-Fordist theories of the economy and then investigates whether there is evidence of a new correspondence emerging between education and the economy. Rather than education being concerned with repression and regimentation and the reproduction of class relations - as Bowles and Gintis argue, it is now suggested (Brown and Lauder, 1992) that changes taking place in the economy, have the potential to create an approach to learning that is very different to that which schools have traditionally promoted.

Fordist education systems assume levels of intelligence to be fixed and that the ability to perform well in 'difficult' subjects reflects a more general ability to be able to cope with the future demands of professional and managerial work. In contrast, Brown and Lauder argue that a post-Fordist education system of the future will be able to

develop a new 'collective intelligence.' For this to happen a less hierarchical and a more egalitarian style of learning is required. One, which is learner centred, rather than teacher controlled.

Chapter 1 provides a general critique of the post-Fordist position. It argues that rather than encouraging the development of higher levels of skills and attributes across the labour force in the way post-Fordists have maintained; recent changes to the production process have created new divisions within the workforce and a more general insecurity in the labour market. On the contrary, it is argued that the new production techniques have the potential to both destroy employment opportunities, casualise large areas of work and undermine traditional avenues of transition from school to work for young people.

### **The growth of credentialism**

If the first part of chapter 1 highlights the shortcomings of the post-Fordist thesis and the limitations of 'correspondence' theory, then the second part of the chapter argues that changes in the nature of employment and in employment recruitment have affected the relationship between young people and educational qualifications. Young people now spend much more time in full time education, compared with previous generations. They have not only become 'better qualified', but the occupational structure they now seek to enter is a very different one. The chapter argues that a major reason why qualifications are now more important is because of the role that educational credentials play in labour recruitment and the fact that the type of collectivist transition from school to work described by Willis (1974) for example, is now less significant and less

available as a strategy for young people at the start of the twenty-first century. Thus, if in the post-war years, the pursuit of qualifications was only associated with a minority destined for white collar or professional employment, then today qualifications play a much more significant role.

The chapter assesses neo-Marxist and neo-Weberian attempts to explain changes in the occupation structure, the fragmentation of class and in particular arguments about the growth of an intermediate, service, or occupational middle class, that is dependent on what Wright refers to as 'skill assets' (Wright, 1989). As a result, it concludes that young people now have to stay in full time education and acquire a large number of qualifications if they are to secure stable employment and avoid being dependent on 'Mcjobs,' casualised employment at the lower end of the service sector.

The chapter revisits Collins (1979) arguments about the growth of a 'credential society,' in which rather than simply reflecting changes in the production process, educational qualifications take on a wider social and political significance. In a credential society it is the 'exchange value' of qualifications, rather than the nature of what is learned that is most important. Following Collins, the chapter concludes that in a credential society, different types of qualification enjoy differing degrees of prestige. For example vocational qualifications are regarded as inferior to academic ones. This is significant because the Advanced level GNVQ created as the vocational equivalent of GCE A-level has continued to be used by more and more students as an alternative pathway to university. The changing nature of vocational qualifications and their relationship with academic learning is a major focus of this thesis.

## **Vocational Education and the state: the need for a new settlement**

Chapter 2 examines how the increased participation in learning has been reflected in the major reorganisation of state education policy. Using a theoretical framework adopted by Ainley (1999), it examines the significance of different types of qualifications, - academic, vocational and applied, - in the creation of a new class 'settlement.' It outlines the way in which education, from the upper secondary years to university has been reorganised into different pathways, so as to be able to 'cool out' a new generation of learners who remain in full time education for much longer.

## **Part Two. From GNVQ to VCE: a critical policy history**

In the context of what has been argued above, chapters 3 and 4 provide a critical history of the development of vocational qualifications like GNVQ. Chapter 3 traces the roots of the GNVQ in the 'new vocationalism' of the 1980s and to the National Council for Vocational Qualifications. Rather than representing a new type of learning appropriate for a new world of work, chapter 3 demonstrates how the pedagogy behind the GNVQ has been contradictory and shaped by more significant factors than perceived skill changes in the economy.

Chapter 4 examines the subsequent changes made to the Advanced level GNVQ when it was re-launched as a Vocational A-level (Vocational Certificate of Education/VCE) in September 2000. In addition to being given a new title, the

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qualification also took on many of the characteristics of the GCE A-level. In the context of the arguments that have been discussed about the growth of 'credentialism,' the chapter explains the reasons for the 'academic drift' of GNVQ/VCE. For example, it examines the increased significance of GNVQ as an entrance qualification for higher education and as a vocational A-level within the *Curriculum 2000* proposals for post-16 education. It concludes that the changes reflect the contradictory position of GNVQ. If -- as chapter two claims, - vocational qualifications have been created to 'cool out' a new generation of learners, they have also been used by students to try and 'drift up' the education system.

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Chapter 4 also argues that rather than representing a clear move towards the baccalaureate style qualification sought by curriculum modernisers in which academic and vocational learning had equal status, the reform that made up *Curriculum 2000* was a muddled compromise which attempted to placate both curriculum reformers and conservatives. Despite taking on some of the characteristics of academic qualifications, the chapter shows that the reality has been that vocational qualifications are still regarded as inferior to academic ones.

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Chapter 5 examines the role of 'core/key skills' in the curriculum. Key skills were a mandatory part of GNVQ and designed to reflect a series of generic skills and competencies now said to be necessary for the workforce of the twenty first century. However, the chapter concludes that the actual reality of key skills has been rather different. As has been the case with GNVQ, key skills have been responded to in very different ways by different types of institutions. They have only been considered

valuable by students; if they are able to use them to gain additional UCAS (university entrance) points, or as proxy qualifications for GCSE maths and English.

Chapter 6, the final part of section two, examines the proposals<sup>1</sup> from the Tomlinson working group - established as a result of the continuing instability in post-16 education and exemplified by the 2002 exam crisis. The chapter argues that despite Tomlinson's desire to increase opportunities and to improve the status of vocational qualifications, his proposals, like those of *Curriculum 2000* reflect the constraints on and the contradictions of curriculum reform, described in the preceding chapters. In particular there continues to be the contradiction between the function of qualifications like GNVQ in differentiating learners into 'academic' and 'vocational' tracks and in their role in enabling individual students to try and move up the education system.

### **Part Three. *Inner London and Anglia.***

The final part of the thesis uses case study evidence from sixth formers in *Inner London* and *East Anglia*. It discusses whether these young people, particularly those at *Inner London* represent the emergence of new generation of students, who have reached an active accommodation with the educational system and are able to continue to 'learn' at school and then progress to local universities while continuing to 'earn' in local superstores, shops and warehouses. It argues however, that contradictions and uncertainties continue to exist and that the experiences of the *Inner London* students are also very different ones compared to those at *Anglia*, the other school in the case study.

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<sup>1</sup> The thesis has concentrated primarily on Tomlinson's 'interim' proposals. The final report has published at the time of the thesis submission and is referred to briefly, in the final chapter.

### **‘Should I stay or should I go?’**

A key argument in this section is that students adopt an instrumental approach to their studies and that they will only continue in full time education for as long as they consider that their employment opportunities will be significantly improved. In other words it returns to the argument put forward at the end of chapter 1, that as a result of changing labour market conditions, some working class students have adopted a different attitude towards gaining qualifications. However it also argues that this is the consequence of a process of class repositioning rather than simply a student’s personal reorientation.

The thesis concludes that even though the majority of the *Inner London* sample is able to progress to higher education, the future employment and the futures of many other potential students is by no means assured. For example it examines arguments about the future demand for graduates and the effects of the introduction of tuition fees and mounting student debt. For the new generation of students the question will continue to be ‘should I stay or should I go’.

### **Some methodological issues**

Since this research project began in 1998, I have collected a large amount of material from a variety of sources. The major sources of secondary data have been cited below. However it is also necessary to emphasise that other more informal processes have been just as significant. For example I have had many ‘off the record’ discussions with students in school, as well as with practitioners at various conferences. Also significant



have been ongoing debates and discussions with activist/practitioners and in the journals with which I have been associated, - *Education and Social Justice*, *Socialist Teacher*, *Post-16 Educator* and more recently, *Radical Education Journal*.

As a result, these opportunities have provided what C Wright Mills (1959) referred to as 'fringe thoughts' and have led to more organised and systematic thinking. In this respect, Mills comment about the sometimes ad hoc nature of the research process is as relevant today as it was forty years ago. Other discussions that have taken place at various seminars or academic conferences have been more theoretically informed and have been used to strengthen ideas that I have been in the process of developing.

The opening chapter and the early pages of chapter 3, which examine the relationship between education, qualifications and the economy, have drawn on a range of existing academic material. In view of the extensive literature on post-Fordism, I have been forced to be selective. A full analysis of post-Fordism and of alternative conceptual models such, as 'lean production' would merit a full thesis in itself. Thus, if I appear to be rather brief in my treatment of certain aspects of post-Fordism, then this is the result of the particular emphasis of the thesis.

In chapter 2 about the new GNVQ and the introduction of *Curriculum 2000* and for chapter 3 about key skills, I have used material from government agencies and national organisations. I have also been able to draw on national statistics collected by, and reports produced for The Qualifications and Curriculum Agency (QCA), the Department for Education of Employment and Skills (DfES), the University Admissions and Clearance Services (UCAS). I have also been able to use reports and reviews published by the now defunct National Council for Vocational Qualifications.

(NCVQ). The changing terrain of post-16 education has meant that the period during which the research has been carried out has also been a busy one for policy makers, and as a result there have been two government Green Papers, as well as several major curriculum statements by QCA.

In my analysis of *Curriculum 2000* I have made considerable use of data contained in working papers produced by the Institute of Education /Nuffield Foundation project. This research led by Ken Spours and Ann Hodgson was undertaken between 1999 and 2003,<sup>2</sup> although much of the material in chapter two is drawn from data published between September 1999 and December 2001. The Nuffield data is a combination of desk research and interviews with national organisations, data from national surveys by the DFES and UCAS, as well as a case study of 50 institutions. The Nuffield working papers have been primarily produced for policy makers and do not attempt a major sociological or theoretical analysis. However they still serve as the most comprehensive account of the way in which *Curriculum 2000* has been implemented.

As well as providing regular statistical data about the characteristics of university applicants, UCAS has also produced a large amount of data on the implementation of *Curriculum 2000*. In addition to monitoring school and college practices, it encouraged universities to put statements about *Curriculum 2000* on their websites. The latter half of chapter 2 makes extensive use of these.

The majority of the data in the chapters dealing with qualification and curriculum reform has been collected from material published up to the end of 2002. As will be also be evident, I have made extensive use of the educational press and newspapers

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<sup>2</sup> A summary of the Nuffield research can be found in Hodgson and Spours (2003) *Beyond A levels, Curriculum 2000 and the reform of 14-19 education*.

such as *The Guardian*, which, because of the nature of its readership, provides regular coverage of education policy developments. Observations by OFSTED, for example, its 2003 review of *Curriculum 2000* have been included, as well as some of the final conclusions from the Hodgson and Spours research.

### **The *Inner London* and *Anglia* case studies**

If there is a weaknesses in Ainley's theoretical framework, it is that the question of human agency is not pursued sufficiently (Willis 1977, Brown, 1987). The case study has been used to investigate how students make sense of their courses and participate in the construction of the wider 'settlement.' For example it examines their motives for remaining in education, their reasons for choosing vocational courses and their subsequent decisions about whether to continue to university.

Most of the data has been collected over an eighteen-month period from Advanced level Business Studies students in *Inner London* School. There have been practical justifications for using *Inner London*. I was Head of Business Studies at the school and thus had easy and immediate access to the twenty one students in the cohort.

However, there were also other reasons. In particular, the educational careers of these students reflected many of the more general characteristics of GNVQ students identified in the thesis. Data was collected through questionnaires and interviews at various stages of the course, but also by observing classroom activity and recording student discussions in a journal/diary. The students have also provided data about their initial experiences of university.

I have used a group of GNVQ Health and Social Care students at *Anglia* school to provide a comparative dimension. There were practical reasons for choosing this school in that I was able to use a personal contact. But the *Anglia* students were also used because they were very different from those in *Inner London*, being exclusively white and female. Compared with the research at *Inner London* the *Anglia* study was more limited. Data was collected using interviews and questionnaires in two visits to the school. Finally a group of A-level students at both schools were also used to provide a further comparison, not only to emphasise differences between students on different types of courses, but also differences between *Inner London* and *Anglia* as a whole.

In examining the educational careers of students, the early part of chapter 7 assesses the significance of 'rational action theory,' in sociology (Goldthorpe, 1996). It argues that earlier work by Willis, (1977) and by Brown, (1987) which emphasises the importance of class, rather than the personal and individual aspects of 'transition' from school to employment, still remains important in helping to theorise the decision making processes of the current generation of students.

A more detailed account of the research methodology, its significance for the rest of the thesis and the relationship with the earlier studies by Willis and Brown has been included at the beginning of chapter 7. The chapter also addresses issues that emerge in conducting research while being a classroom practitioner.

### **Research, politics and educational change.**

Because of the time period over which this thesis has been produced much of the text, particularly the middle section on policy development has been presented as an

historical narrative. However this should not be seen as undermining the conclusions of the thesis. The period between 1995 and 2002 for example has been analysed in greater detail because the policy developments within this period have been the most significant. My interest in the changing nature of vocational education has arisen from my work as a practitioner and in this respect; the research constitutes a form of 'action research.'

But my research has also been enhanced by my activities as an activist in the National Union of Teachers and my participation in projects associated with curriculum reform. Mills' arguments 'on politics,' about the (necessary) relationship between social research and politics have been echoed more recently by Epstein (1993). Like Epstein, I also believe that there are important consequences of a decision to present research that remains divorced from politics. Though this work seeks to make a contribution to academic understanding about the development of education policy, I remain a politically committed researcher.

As a result, many of the arguments that have formed the basis of this research have appeared in a shorter form in journals referred to earlier. These publications have - albeit in different ways, sought to bring analytical clarity to some of the day-to-day issues faced by education activists in trade unions or other campaigns. I have also contributed to *The Teacher* magazine produced by the NUT. The thesis concludes by addressing some of political issues faced by practitioners committed to changing the way that learning and education are organised.

## **Part One**

### **The wider context of qualification reform**

# Chapter 1

## Education, Economy and class recomposition and the implications for education: a review of the literature

The operative class will need the same knowledge and skills as the managerial and professional class.

Labour Party Green Paper (1993)<sup>3</sup>

We are talking about investing in human capital in the age of knowledge, to compete in the global economy, to live in a civilized society and to develop the talents of each and everyone of us

David Blunkett (1997)<sup>4</sup>

As the above quotes illustrate, the closing years of the twentieth century have seen British political elites give a new emphasis to education. This chapter examines the current literature about the changing economic and social context of education, particularly vocational education. It also discusses what the implications that any such changes may be for the general direction of education policy.

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3 The Green Paper *Opening doors to a learning society* (the first policy statement on education under Tony Blair's leadership).

4 Introduction to *Qualifying for Success. A consultation paper on post-16 qualification reform*.

## **Education as human capital**

Throughout the post-war period, 'human capital' theory was used to justify the expansion of education. According to human capital theory, education and training should be seen as an essential investment good. As is the case with increases in physical capital, it was argued that increases in the stock of human capital would result in future material benefits not only for the individual, but also for society as a whole. Thus, as Ashton and Green observe

Human capital theory proposes an unproblematic link between the stocks of skills and outputs of a productive system.

(Ashton and Green, 1996, p14)

Human capital theory also implies that the overall amount of education enjoyed by the population is more significant than the particular details of what is taught content. For example, according to Ashton and Green, human capital theory repeats the same level of understanding of skill acquisition, as neo-classical exchange theory of the economy does generally. Education is regarded simply as a 'thing' (Ashton and Green, 1996, p17) - something to be acquired and utilised alongside other input factors. There is, as Brown, Green and Lauder (2001) recognise, no attempt to address the changing economic context of skill formation and the subsequent consequences of this for the nature of schooling. As a result, human capital theory has been seen as inadequate in explaining the relationship between education and economic growth.



### **Vocational education and training in Britain. A 'low skills' economy**

Despite the academic significance of human capital theory, Green (1990) has chronicled the lack of government involvement in educational and training in Britain compared with other countries during the early stages of industrialisation. There have also been comparisons of the process of skill formation in different countries in the twentieth century. (Ashton and Green 1996; Green 1997; Brown, Green and Lauder 2001). These studies have pointed to the failure of education and training in Britain to contribute to the development of a 'high skills' economy.

Though significant expansion of education took place during the post-war period, until the 'Great Debate' of the 1970s (when the contribution of education to economic growth was called in to question,) there continued to be only limited intervention by the central state institutions over the content of schooling. Education was organised almost entirely through the Local Education Authority (LEA) system in which the 'professional autonomy' enjoyed by teachers was also accompanied by a commitment to a 'liberal humanist' curriculum. According to some commentators there remained a general hostility amongst practitioners to the idea that learning should be tied to the 'needs of industry', (Moore 1990; Ainley 1991). Vocational training was provided in a largely ad-hoc manner. The clearest expression of this was the craft apprenticeship system.

Green (1997) has examined the implications of the British 'laissez-faire' approach to industrial training, compared with that which took place in other European countries. He reminds us that there was no real technical education to speak

of before 1880, except that which was provided 'on the job.' Though the 1944 Education Act had established a 'tripartite' system of grammar, technical and secondary modern schools, the reality was that unlike the case in many other European countries, the 'technical' route remained largely undeveloped and less important. In many areas, the major divisions were those between grammar and secondary modern schools. Commentators have also examined the ineffectiveness of the Manpower Services Commission Youth Training schemes of the 1970s and 1980s to improve skill levels. Rather than representing a real 'new vocationalism,' it has been argued that these schemes were often little more than attempts by Conservative governments to mask the increase in youth unemployment that was a feature of this period (Finn 1987, Bates *et al* 1984; Benn and Fairley *eds.* 1986).

It has also been argued that British employers have continued to show only limited interest in and attribute little value to lower level vocational qualifications. Thus, according to Bennett (1995), not only have young people in Britain not pursued vocational qualifications to anywhere near the same extent as their European counterparts, but they have often been discouraged by their employers from engaging in further education or training. According to Jones (Moore, 1986, p.48), although employers as a whole, considered qualifications to be desirable, less than half of his sample thought they were essential. Research by Ashton (1982), has also shown that smaller employers had much less of an interest in qualifications than larger ones. (Moore, p.51).

As a result of the low level of qualifications held by the workforce, it has been argued that Britain, like the USA, has followed a low-skill route to economic

development (Ashton and Green, 1997, p.6). The contribution of education and training has not only been minimal they argue, but it has also varied significantly between different employment sectors and for different levels of employment. Despite having a relatively large number of graduates for example, Britain can be distinguished from other countries like Germany in terms of its poor level of performance in intermediate skills. For example, only 18% of the adult population in the UK in 1998 had a level 3 qualifications, broadly equivalent to A-levels. This can be compared with 50.6% in Germany for example (Brown, Green and Lauder, 2001, p.130).

### **Globalisation and learning**

As we enter the twenty first century, the argument that education and future economic prosperity must now be integral to each other has been at the centre of government policy. New Labour politicians argue that the pressure of international economic competition (which is now generally referred to as 'globalisation') is now such that it demands significant increases in the level of educational performance by the majority of the population, rather than simply by the few. The lower levels of productivity by British workers compared to other European competitors (the consequence of adopting a low skills route to economic growth) have reinforced government claims that an increase in the levels of educational performance is required (DfEE. 1996; DfES. 2002). As a result the National Commission for Education (1993) argued that a nation

like Britain could only remain prosperous if it improved the quality of its education system forward for Education.

For us, knowledge and skills will be central. In an era of worldwide competition and low cost global communications, no country will be able to maintain its standard of living, on the basis of cheap labour and low-tech products and services.

(National Commission, 1993, p.33)

Cole reminds us of the aggressive way in which government has sought to raise the level of educational performance:

Continuous technological change, a key feature of the modernisation agenda, it is argued, needs highly trained and flexible labour. This is to be achieved by an 'improvement in standards'. Schools are to continue to strive for this by competing against each other for pupils/students – one school against each other to achieve the best results. (Cole, 1999, p.8)

Thus from the early years of primary education there has been a battery of policies designed to increase student performance levels. While all schools have been set targets and have been subjected to a much more intensive inspection, successful schools have been encouraged to specialise in particular areas. In the 2001 White Paper *Schools Achieving Success* for example, schools performing well are promised much greater autonomy over the delivery of the curriculum. At the same time,

‘failing schools’ have been subjected to a range of special measures not least, the threat of privatisation and closure.

In the upper years of secondary schools and for post-compulsory education, the Labour Government has also continued to emphasise the importance of improving not only the status, but also the quality of vocational education. It has sought to rectify a situation where in the past young people have only been likely to stay on in school or college to attempt A-levels rather than vocational qualifications. For example to quote the 2000 National Skills Task Force report:

As the OCED has pointed out, our poor performance in vocational provision is a major reason why we fall behind other leading countries in the proportion of 16-19 year olds who stay in learning. It is a deficit we are determined to tackle.... The vocational route will enable us to reach our stretching target of 50% of young people entering higher education compared with only 1 in 6 in 1989 (*Opportunities for All* 2000, p10-11).

### **Post-Fordism. A new correspondence between education and economy?**

But if, as a result of the challenge of globalisation, governments have given a greater priority to increasing the importance of education by government, then there has also been a renewed academic interest in the extent to which the organisation and content of education reflects changes in the nature of the workplace. Some commentators

have argued that as a result of changes in the nature of work, new forms of learning will also be able to emerge (Brown and Lauder, 1992).

Previously, the idea that there is a correspondence between education and the economy found its clearest expression in the work of Bowles and Gintis and their book *Schooling in Capitalist America*. Writing from a Marxist perspective, Bowles and Gintis argue that there is a correspondence between the social relations of production and the social relations of education. Schooling allocates individuals to economic positions through reproducing the capitalist division of labour. Schools do this by producing personality traits appropriate to different levels in the hierarchy of production. Divisions both within and between schools are a reflection of wider divisions within capitalist production. Thus, the organisation of schools with a largely working class population mirrors that of the factory, whereas more elite institutions concentrate on the need for more 'independent' thinking and the development of 'leadership' skills. As Bowles and Gintis write:

The education system works to justify inequality and to produce a labour force whose capacities, credentials, and consciousness are dictated in substantial measure by the requirements of profitable employment in the capitalist economy.

(Bowles and Gintis, 1976, p151)

Bowles and Gintis give considerable attention to the importance of the 'hidden curriculum' – the form that teaching and learning takes in the shaping of the future workforce. According to Bowles and Gintis, the fragmented way in which knowledge

is organised, for example, corresponds to the fragmented nature of the capitalist workforce.

According to Bowles and Gintis, the education system plays a crucial role in the legitimisation of inequalities by formally appearing as a meritocracy. Those who do well are said to succeed on the basis of ability rather than as a result of their class/family background.

While those hostile to neo-Marxist analysis have attacked Bowles and Gintis, their work has also been heavily criticised from within the Marxist tradition (Cole ed. 1988)<sup>5</sup>. However the next part of this chapter examines how interest in correspondence theory has been re-kindled as a result of the emergence of post-Fordist theories of the economy.

At the heart of the post-Fordist analysis is the argument that there has been a move from a labour process based on fragmented and standardised work processes, to one that requires 'flexible specialisation' and the 'multi-skilling' of the workforce. According to Murray (1989) for example, the new production techniques have originated from Japan and in particular from the car manufacturer Toyota. Using cutting edge computer technology, Toyota increased the speed of the production cycle by ten times that of western car producers and rather than relying on using purpose built machines to make standard products, flexible automation enabled general purpose machines to make a variety of products and allow producers to respond more immediately to changes in consumer preference.

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<sup>5</sup> Bowles and Gintis analysis has been attacked for its economism, the failure to allow any autonomy for education systems to develop their own characteristics and for ignoring the possibility of 'class struggle' opposition to school by significant numbers of pupils. For a recent summary see Moore (2004).

For Piore and Sabel (1984), the 'flexible specialisation' that the new technologies facilitate can be used in the production of more specialist and exclusive goods and services. This can be contrasted with the Fordist 'mass production' of standardised goods. However, according to Piore and Sabel, rather than the 'Japanisation' of large plants it is small, decentralised worker-run firms, not restricted by slow moving bureaucracies that are in the best position to take advantage of these developments. They argue that these changes offer the potential for a return to an era of craft production

Though Piore and Sabel's account of post-Fordism remains largely restricted to the technical processes involved, other accounts have focused on the social and political consequences of post-Fordism (Hall and Jacques, *eds.* 1989; Brown and Lauder, 1992). While these have pointed to the globalised nature of the economy and to the uncertainties caused by the collapse of Fordist labour market securities they have adopted a politically progressive approach. For example in Britain, the move from Fordist to post-Fordist production was at the centre of initiatives by the Communist Party and its journal *Marxism Today* to construct a 'new' politics for the 1990s (Hall and Jacques 1989) as an alternative to the enterprise culture of Thatcherism (Avis *et al* 1996). The *Marxism Today* authors outlined a range of cultural arenas where there was the potential for new settlements such as gender and the family, race, the environment and at regional level. Although there was little mention of changes to education in the *Marxism Today* analysis, it has been argued subsequently that post-Fordist developments give a new impetus to progressive change in education.



### **New learning for new times?**

In contrast to Marxist correspondence theory, where the function of education is to ensure that the appropriate traits and attitudes required by different sections of the working class are reproduced among different sections of the school population, it is now suggested that the emergence of post-Fordist economies provides potential for the education system to fulfil a progressive and innovatory role rather than a repressive one.

For Brown and Lauder, moves to post-Fordism will enable a small professional elite to be replaced by a growing managerial and professional service class and a decline in class based divisions in the workplace (Brown and Lauder, 1992, p4). It will result in less hierarchical forms of organisation and in greater management workforce co-operation. It will also result in the end of a system where the majority of jobs require little more than the execution of a set of easily learned routines. As consequence of this is that the emergence of a post-Fordist workplace will encourage the introduction of a new type of learning and a new style of curriculum that will unleash human potential. According to Brown & Lauder, there is now a long overdue opportunity for the education system to be able to create a new 'collective intelligence', (Brown and Lauder, p27.) which will involve the creation of a less hierarchical and more egalitarian style of learning. This will replace the current top down and 'bureaucratic' schooling of the Fordist age. Fordist schooling has assumed that levels of intelligence are more or less fixed and that the ability to perform well in 'difficult' subjects reflected a more general ability to be able to cope with the

demands of professional and managerial work.<sup>6</sup> Under this system they argue, schools have been primarily concerned with the selection of people for a hierarchical division of labour. In a later article Brown and Lauder (1996) identify the emergence of a 'left moderniser' political project where the 'knowledge skills and insights' of the population will provide the key to prosperity. According to Jones and Hatcher (1994) the modernising tendency is reflected in the proposals for reforming post-16 education published by the Institute Public Policy Research (IPPR 1990). In the document *A British Baccalaureate*, the IPPR sought to replace the traditional academic/vocational divide with a new baccalaureate qualification. *Learning to Succeed*, the 1993 report of The National Commission for Education also called for significant changes in education in response to widespread changes in the economy and in the workplace. 'Modernisation' is also a significant influence in the 1999 Royal Society of Arts (RSA) document *Opening Minds* where it is argued that schools should concentrate on improving children's ability to 'understand and do' rather than testing their memories.<sup>7</sup> *Opening Minds* calls for the curriculum to be reconstructed around a series of generic competencies.

Assumptions about the changing nature of work and economy were used to justify the growth of the 'new vocationalism' of the 1970s and 1980s pioneered by the Manpower Services Commission and discussed in more detail in chapter 3. For example, Raggatt and Williams (1998) argue that a feature of the policy initiatives

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<sup>6</sup> For further arguments about the need for a new type of education see for example Bayliss, 1999; Meighan, 1999; Wilkinson, 1999; Young, 1999.

<sup>7</sup> The RSA has been at the forefront of debates about modernising the curriculum. In 1995 for example, it published a policy document on 14-19 education which called for the end of the academic-vocational divide and a new approach to learning.

developed by the MSC was the desire to move away from notions of specific technical skills towards a set of more broadly based/cross occupational competence.

Some commentators have contrasted the different strands of Conservative education policy in the 1980s, where according to Jones 'Conservative Modernisers' sought to challenge many of the basic assumptions of educational conservatism, to 're-order' the traditional hierarchies of knowledge and to argue that the dominance of academic education was one of the reasons why Britain had lost its competitive edge (Jones, 1989, p102).

Moderniser themes have continued to be visible within the more general rhetoric that surrounds New Labour's education agenda. For example, Labour have not only continued to enthusiastically encouraged the idea of a 'learning society' (1993; 1997), but have also promoted the view that in the twenty-first century, learning will now have to be a 'lifelong' process and that more and more people will be highly skilled 'knowledge workers'.

As significantly, new descriptions of the occupational and employment structure now feature in material produced for secondary school students by the agencies that now make up the careers service. For example, according to one local service:

It's hard to predict exactly how jobs will change over the next few years. However, there are some trends. More jobs will need a high level of skills and qualifications. People will need to update their skills frequently. Fewer people

will be doing unskilled work. More people will work from home. Even more use will be made of electronic forms of communication.

(*Look Ahead. Lifetime Careers*, 2000, p5<sup>8</sup>)

### **The myth of post-Fordism. New skills or new competences?**

However the post-Fordist case and the imperative that it provides for changing the education system is far from a being universally accepted. In response to Piore and Sabel's claims for example, Smith (1994) argues that though firms may be downsizing, it should not be assumed that they are adopting the type of progressive working practices that post-Fordists claim. On the contrary, concentration of economic power is becoming more pronounced. For Smith, Fordist production may be in crisis and the era of Fordism coming to a close, but rather than the emergence of a progressive post-Fordism, the technological advances in production reflect the growth of 'lean production.' Lean production is different from old style Fordism and does have implications for the labour process, however Smith dismisses the optimistic scenario of the workplace put forward by post-Fordists. He argues that lean production is primarily a response to increasingly globalised competition where the economic survival of the firm depends on continued cost reduction and on the shortening of the turnover cycle.

According to Smith, an element of multi-skilling amongst shop floor operatives is crucial if time is to be used more effectively. The 'detailed labour' of Fordism, where a worker is assigned a single task to perform repeatedly, but is then not able to

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<sup>8</sup> Issued to school students in Brent and Harrow.

do anything else is no longer cost effective. Workers now Smith argues, not only have to be able to operate machinery but also to deal with faults and to be able to reprogram for a variety of purposes.

Technological advance has also allowed firms to improve coordination with suppliers and to operate 'just in time' schedules so as to prevent stockpiles and respond quickly to changes in consumer demand. Team working is therefore a requirement if information is to be shared and productivity to increase

The best way to attain these goals is to have workers participate in teams. If the intelligence of the worker is to be mobilised...then the worker cannot be treated as an isolated individual.

(Smith, 1994, p.14)

These activities in themselves do not Smith argues, fundamentally change the relationship between labour and capital. On the contrary, lean production is characterised by hyper exploitation and the unrelenting pace at which capital now expects labour to operate. Lean production requires complex procedures for the management, control and more sophisticated surveillance of workers. These undermine any individual advantages that may be derived from individual workers learning new technical skills. For Aronowitz and DiFazio (1994), the increased importance of psychology to enhance workforce motivation also demonstrates the increased subordination of the human sciences and scientific technology to the interest of capital.

Likewise for Avis (Avis *et al*, 1996), the extension of what are referred to as 'neo-Fordist' rather than post-Fordist working practices reflects the need to tighten the regulation of labour rather than increase its technical ability. Thus, if there are aspects of work that now appear to enable labour to become more 'flexible', he argues these are taking place on terrain controlled by the interests of big business profitability. The changes in the production process and the loosening of some relationships between the manager and managed have more to do with establishing new forms of control over the workforce, shaping subjectivity and increasing deference within the workforce.

### **New divisions within the workplace**

For Smith, the workforce under lean production is also an increasingly divided one, with firms employing a small core of (semi) privileged workers, but also relying on extensive sub- contracting and outsourcing and on the existence of a 'peripheral' labour force to perform more the more routine work. Only a relatively small proportion of workers (those in 'core' plants, primarily manufacturing assembly plants and office headquarters), now enjoy anything approaching lifetime employment guarantees.

For example, the use of 'temporary' labour in the US has increased by about 20% in every year since 1992 Temp. agencies are amongst Europe's fastest growing companies (Klein, 2000). For Murray, commenting on changes in Japan during the 1980s, the 'dualism' of the labour market is particularly sharp. On the one hand, there is a 'core' workforce accounting for a third of employees, on the other there is a

peripheral sub-contract and sweated economy, casualised, low paid, weakly organised.

In response to the increased use of information technology in the workplace, Aronowitz and Di Fazio argue that regardless of its potential and in sharp contrast to Piore and Sabel's arguments about the re-emergence of craft production, information technology has been used to reproduce managerial hierarchies and to widen the gap between the small number of jobs that require more knowledge and the large number of jobs that require less. In the economy production, divisions within intellectual labour itself have now also replaced the previous divisions between intellectual and manual labour. If there are now clear distinctions between operatives and professional-managerial employees, there are also, Aronowitz and Di Fazio argue, divisions between 'lower' operating and 'higher' more expert staff.

### **A new insecurity**

The Fordist economy was in many respects a highly regulated and organised market. It employed large numbers of highly unionised workers on full time, permanent contracts. Smith argues that in comparison, there is now a general uncertainty about employment under lean production an uncertainty that can also be applied to sections of the core workforce, as firms continually seek to restructure to survive and to replace labour with machinery or even to move production to more favourable localities. Another result of a desire for increased flexibility within labour markets is an increase in the amount of job insecurity.

The backdrop to lean production is also one where there is a refusal of governments, social democratic or otherwise, to guarantee welfare provision or to be able to commit them to 'Fordist' full employment. In modern social democratic thinking, Smith argues, the onus now falls on the individual citizen to ensure that they are able to re-skill to keep up with the changing employment trends.

According to Brown:

Surveys have show job security to be one of the most frequently desired attributes of a job...those seeking paid work want the labour market to provide them with secure employment, for the past fifteen or twenty years it has failed to do so

(Brown, 1997, p77).

In the next part of the chapter it will be argued that rather than reflecting increased skill requirements in the economy, the increased desire amongst young people to acquire qualifications is a consequence of the increasing uncertainty in the labour market, the breakdown of the collective avenues of transition from school to work and the collapse of the apprenticeship system. It argues that it is these developments rather than the increased demand by employers for greater levels of technical skill, which have intensified the drift towards what Collins (1979) refers to as a 'credential society'. Most of the discussion so far has also concentrated on changes within manufacturing. However, issues of division and insecurity also apply to developments in the service sector. As the chapter will argue, there are major changes



taking place in white collar, managerial and professional work and the nature of the service sector employment is itself changing.

### **The destruction of jobs?**

It is the argument that new technology and new working practices will destroy rather than create opportunities for stable employment that provides the most radical critique of post-Fordism. This has been developed most forcefully by Aronowitz and DiFazio, for whom a consequence of an increase in 'knowledge work' has been the widening of the gap between intellectual, technical and manual labour and between a relatively small number of jobs that, owing to technological complexity, require more technology and a much larger number that require less- as the mass of jobs are 'deskilled' (Aronowitz and Di Fazio, 1994, p15).

For these authors the development of capitalism has resulted in the massive overproduction of commodities and falling profits and as a result, the continuous downsizing of plant and the necessity to cut wage bills. However, the claim that advances in production technologies will lead to the disappearance of work is a disputed one. According to Henwood (2003) for example, between 1991 and 1995, rather than there being a decline in work, the US economy created over 7 million new jobs. However if the 'end of work' thesis does not hold up generally, this does not mean that there have not been significant changes in employment opportunities for certain sections of the population, particularly young people.

Chapter 2 will examine the argument that the increase in school staying on rates is a consequence of the decline in employment opportunities for young people and that the extension of education and training is becoming a replacement for social control formerly exercised in the workplace (Ainley 1999). It will argue that if the youth opportunities policies of the 1970s and early 80s sought to officially abolish youth unemployment by compulsory training through a policy of what Finn (1987) termed 'training without jobs,' then educational institutions are now increasingly taking on this role.

### **Post Fordist or Neo-Fordist education?**

If the arguments above not only seek to refute the post-Fordist case; they also challenge the assumptions that economic change will always result in progressive (education) change. In their later article, Brown and Lauder are less optimistic about the potential for a post-Fordist/left-moderniser project. They argue that the USA and the UK in particular, remain trapped within 'neo-Fordist' solutions to the crisis of Fordism (Brown and Lauder, 1996 p 5). As a result they argue that in economies that turn to cost-cutting and low skilled flexible production rather than responding to globalisation through innovation and high value, high quality production, education is likely to follow a similar course. Brown and Lauder argue that neo-Fordist economies, particularly the UK and USA, have generated 'New Right' rather than left moderniser education programs and that these have resulted in the continued

marketisation of education, social class and ethnic polarisation and a reluctance by employers to invest seriously in education and training.

For Esland, rather than representing a response to the challenges of globalisation and helping to modernise the economy, the education and training policies of the Conservatives in the UK during the 1980s and 1990s were designed to preserve Britain's national culture, secure its antiquated class relations and to promote economic individualism.

The consequences of the New Right's emphasis on implementing its political principles through education and training have been the further weakening of the British economy and the serious under-investment in the qualitative upgrading of the nation's knowledge and skill base. (Esland, p.49, Avis *et al.*).

The tensions between the cultural project of conservatism, with its emphasis on an academic curriculum originating from the grammar school, and the attempts to modernise education so as to be able to respond to more intensive international competition have also been documented in detail by Jones (1989, 2004). In providing a critical history of recent developments in full time vocational education the second section, chapters 2, 3 and 4, will argue that in the context of rising student numbers, the growth of vocational qualifications like GNVQ has been related to the needs of social control and the task of securing political hegemony within education, rather than developing skill formation.

The remainder of this chapter examines literature about changes in the occupational order. It discusses the class recomposition that has been the consequence of changes in production described above. It argues that the increased significance of educational qualifications is the result of the breakdown of the traditional avenues of employment for young people and the insecurities and uncertainties that this has created.

### **Education, qualifications and labour market recruitment reconsidered**

The first part of this chapter has examined the literature about post-Fordism and changes in the production process. It has disputed the claim that economies of the twenty-first century will require a workforce with much more advanced skill levels - a new collective intelligence. Instead, it has argued that Fordism has been replaced by 'lean production' or by neo-Fordist production and that rather than the workplace becoming more skilled, it has become both more intensive and less secure. The next part of this chapter examines recent changes in the occupational structure and their implications for labour recruitment. It argues that young people now face a changing occupational structure, one where educational credentials have become more important in recruitment. In assessing the importance of credentials in the labour market it examines the contribution of Weberian and Marxist theories of social stratification.

If there is little evidence to support the 'supply side' argument that changes in the

economy have resulted in a requirement for new and much higher skill levels amongst workers, then it is certainly the case that young people now continue in full-time education for much longer. As a result, they have become much more ‘certified’ than previous generations. According to Green, Wolf and Leney (2001) for example, from the late 1980s it has become the exception, rather than rule to leave full-time education at the end of compulsory schooling. As the table below indicates, the last decade of the twentieth century saw a significant increase in the number of young people continuing to stay in school or college beyond the date they were legally able to leave.

	1988	1993	1998
Staying in full-time education (age 16)	51.5%	72.6%	70.5%
Staying in full-time education (age17)	35.5%	57.5%	58.2%

(Source DfEE National Statistical Review)

These are significant changes. If they are not the direct consequence of increases in skill requirements then what is the relationship between the increased pursuit of educational qualifications and labour market recruitment? The remainder of the chapter examines alternative explanations of why educational qualifications have become increasingly significant in securing stable and reliable employment.

### **Early leaving**

As has been noted earlier, staying on rates have been lower in Britain than in other countries. Even in 1970 for example, 44% of young people still left without any graded examination passes (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997 p. 15). In other words for most of the post-war period, it could be argued that educational credentials were not necessary to secure many types of employment. A number of studies have pointed to the continued importance of the 'informal' and unofficial methods of recruitment into traditional industries, such as mining and dock labouring. In these industries young males continued to move into employment as a result of kinship or community ties, rather than on the basis of holding particular educational credentials. Dennis, Henriques and Slaughter (1956) and Frankenberg (1966), have provided an understanding of the recruitment process through wider studies working class communities centred around a particular industry like coal mining.

The 'classic' sociological work on the importance of kinship in the traditional working class community however, is probably Young and Willmott's study of Bethnal Green. In Bethnal Green, local community networks serve as an 'informal labour exchange' (Young and Willmott, 1957, p.95). The authors describe the pattern of father-son succession into work as a 'recognised practice' (p 97) and how recruitment process was organised around a system of 'calling'. In Bethnal Green educational credentials, like attending grammar school were seen as the hallmark of white-collar employment and only sought for their children by 'ambitious' parents

wanting their children to be able to move out of Bethnal Green (Young and Willmott p, 29).

In the Bowles and Gintis model, schooling plays an important part in both the lowering of aspirations and in the preparation of the working class for low grade employment. However it has been argued by Willis (1977), that school may play little if any role in assisting the transition from the classroom to particular types of employment. Thus, in his influential study of working class boys on a post RSLA<sup>9</sup> year at secondary modern school, Willis describes how the 'official' messages of school, - for example the importance of working hard and gaining qualifications so as to ensure better employment prospects, is not only rejected but is openly opposed. Rather than school, 'the lads' (the group of boys who form the basis of the Willis case study), rely on a variety of kinship and local community networks. Activities of friends and relatives - particularly fathers, as well as their own experience of part-time work, not only provide the lads with knowledge about the workplace, but also with an alternative model of the occupational structure, one in which the real 'grafting' of unskilled manual work receives much greater status than the 'pen pushing' of non-manual employment. The collective opposition of the lads to school authority also results in 'profound similarities between school counter culture and shop floor culture' (Willis, 1977 p.39). Thus, even though educational qualifications may be able to provide individual mobility from manual to non manual/middle class employment for a small number of working class students and will legitimise school to working class 'conformists,' for 'the lads' the need to pass school examinations is collectively ridiculed and the 'er oles,' - those who do seek to obtain

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<sup>9</sup> The Raising of the School leaving age in 1971.

qualifications so as to enter white collar employment are likely to become ostracised by their peers.

### **The collapse of youth employment opportunities**

The changes in the nature of production, the increased insecurity and the decline of traditional avenues of employment described earlier have been reflected most significantly amongst youth. When the school leaving age was raised in 1972, two thirds of school leavers still left as early as possible and most obtained employment. However according to Ahier and Moore (1999), by 1992 only 13% of the equivalent group of 16-17 year olds had full time jobs. For Ahier and Moore, these changes are not simply the result of recession, they are a consequence of wider economic restructuring, the decline of sectors like manufacturing that have traditionally employed school leavers, the growth of others sectors that traditionally have not.

The decline of the traditional 'apprenticeship' has already been noted. In the 1960s 40% of boy school leavers gained apprenticeships, but this proportion was to half by 1981 (Ainley, 1999, p82). As a result of this, the number of 15-17 year olds staying in full time education voluntarily a figure which had already increased from 30% to 50% during the 1960s, rose to over well over two thirds of 16-18 by the end of the twentieth century.

Using evidence from their Cambridgeshire sample, Ahier and Moore also note reluctance on the part of employers to offer full time employment to school students doing work experience in the service sector. They argue that employers were more



likely to want to employ other categories of workers, for example women returnees often on a part-time basis.

### **The qualifications explosion**

According to the White Paper, *Learning to Compete*, it is now the norm for young people to continue learning after 16. (DfEE, 1996, p3). In recent years the amount of qualifications gained by young people, has increased significantly. There has also been a marked rise in the performance level of those seeking established qualifications. In 1951, only 5% of the cohort took A-levels and one third of these failed. Today a substantial minority of the cohort enters and 90% pass. In the academic year 2000-2001 for example, 49.2% of students achieved five GCSE grades A-C, while the number failing to obtain any grades at all fell to around 5.5% (*The Guardian* 20/11/2001). According to the Joint Council for General Qualifications Annual Report, in 2003 26 million exam scripts and items of coursework were submitted and 780,000 A-level results and 6 million A-level results were issued. However, as the following chapters will show, equally significant has been the arrival of new qualifications like the GNVQ.

As has been noted earlier, there has been a significant fall in the number of 18 year olds with no academic qualifications. By 1987, this group represented 13% and by 1996 only 5%. (TES 29/1/99). According to the National Skills Task Force, the proportion of the workforce holding formal qualifications has risen from just over 50% in 1979 to just under 90% in 1999 and the number holding level 4 (post-A level)

qualifications has doubled (DfES 2000, p61). According to one survey, (*The Guardian* 16/12/97) educational qualifications of one type or another, are now required for well over half of all jobs, regardless of which economic sector they are part of. The survey results also suggest that during the last ten years, there has been a sharp increase in employer demand for staff in possession of Advanced level qualifications. In a more recent report the CBI (2003) claim that in 80% of jobs, employers now look for people with level 2 (GCSE) qualifications or above.

The increases in the amount of qualifications held by young people has coincided with major changes in basic occupational categories and in the shape of the occupational structure. These changes have been reflected for example, in the construction of new Register General occupational categories.<sup>10</sup> They show not only an increased predominance of white-collar employment, but in particular, a significant increases in the size of the 'technical/managerial' occupational groups. The ESRC authors responsible for the reclassification of the new occupational categories conclude that given the nature of work and occupations in late 20<sup>th</sup> century market economies, the manual -non manual divide is now no longer a meaningful distinction.

For example, between 1991 and 1997 in the UK, the Administrative and Managerial occupational sector increased from 17.5% to 18.7% of the working population and the Professional and Technical from 19.5% to 21%. In total 77% of the working population were employed in the service sector while the proportion of those employed in the manufacturing sector had fallen to 14.5 %. The changes for the USA have been similar with those employed in manufacturing representing 14.1% of the population in 1997 and those in services 75.6 (Brown, Green, Lauder 2001, p.18). Brown (1997)

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<sup>10</sup> Based on data collected through an ESRC project at Essex University, Brindle, *The Guardian* 01/12 1997)

points out that the shift from manual to non-manual work has also occurred within sectors and is not just attributed to the growth of the service sector. 39% of those employed in manufacturing in 1994 were employed in non-manual work (Brown *et al* 1997 p5).

In these new conditions, the holding of particular types of qualifications has continued to pay dividends in the jobs market. For example, those with a degree have continued to earn up to 80% more than those without any qualifications and 20% more than those with two A-levels. (Robinson, 1997). More recent figures published by the DfES<sup>11</sup> show that compared with an average of £10.27 for A-levels, the hourly earnings of people only qualified to GCSE level fell from £9.20 to £9.02 while the pay of those with qualifications below GCSE dropped from £8.60 to £8.40.

### **From collective transition to ‘class fragmentation’**

If the increase in the level of educational credentials held by the population has coincided with the increase in service sector employment, the decline of apprenticeship and a reduction of employment opportunities for young people, then from the Weberian perspective, a perspective which has traditionally allowed for the increasing multiplicity of class groups (Savage *et al*, 1992). This can be seen to reflect an increasingly ‘fragmented’ occupational order compared with one based on clear divisions between manual and non- manual work (Roberts *et*

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<sup>11</sup> The level of highest qualification held by young people and adults: England 2003. [www.dfes.gov.uk/statistics](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/statistics).

al, 1977). As a result, the type of 'collective transition' from school to employment, described by Willis is no longer an option for the majority of those students approaching the end of their compulsory schooling. According to Castells (1999) for example, there has been a process of 'disaggregation' and 'individualisation' of labour (Castells, 1999 p265) and a reversal of historic features of the industrial age. Castells argues that this process is set to intensify and that it will continue to fragment the economic and social structure of society.

Ainley (1993; 1999), suggests that the decline of traditional working class employment has resulted in both the blurring of the manual–non-manual divide and the emergence of a large 'working middle' group of white-collar employees. According to Ainley, the traditional tripartite social pyramid has been pulled apart. However, rather than this reflecting a move towards the more egalitarian work-place described by post Fordists or a levelling up of class,<sup>12</sup> large areas of white collar work are he argues, now becoming 'proletarianised' (Braverman, 1974). He also argues that white collar/service employment itself has become highly diverse (Ainley p.38, 1993) with the differences between those at the top and the bottom of the non-manual group now becoming more significant, than the old manual-non-manual distinctions.

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<sup>12</sup> For example, the 'working middle' for example should not be confused with theories about the 'new middle class.'

### **Employers, credentials and occupational assets**

Compared with its Weberian counterpart, Marxist sociology has found it more difficult to deal with the situation of an increasingly large and fragmented white-collar 'middle' class. (Callinicos and Harman 1987). Perhaps the most ambitious and for Callinicos and Harman, the most significant capitulation to a Weberian theory of class, is that of Olin Wright. (1985;1989)

Wright suggests that between the two main classes of capitalist society and in addition to the traditional petty bourgeoisie, eight other 'class locations' can be identified. Wright identifies the following class locations, expert managers, expert supervisors, expert non-supervisors, semi credentialised managers, semi credentialised supervisors, and semi credentialised workers, uncredentialised managers and uncredentialised supervisors. (Wright, 1989, p25).

Wright argues that the differences between class locations can be explained in terms of differences in the amount of productive 'assets' held by particular occupational groups. In addition to class exploitation on the basis of ownership/non ownership of capital, there is also the exploitation of the 'asset poor' by the 'asset rich' (Wright, 1989). In this respect Wright identifies groups of workers who possess what he describes as 'organisational assets' as a result of holding key managerial positions in organisations. On the other hand there are those who he characterises as possessing 'skill assets.' For example, there are 'professionals' and 'experts' who are able to capitalise on their scarce skills especially when these are legally backed up by credentials. Wright refers to these as rewards as 'credential rents'.

A further development in the organisational structure of capitalist enterprises is the number of supervisory workers relying on organisational assets (which have been gained because of 'internal' promotion within the organisation), now being replaced by 'credentialised' employees recruited from outside. Additionally, the growth of self-employed specialists who now often work on an outsourcing basis has helped contribute to the decline in the significance of the internally promoted manager (Savage *et al.* 1992).

If the decline of mass factory employment and of a 'collective transition' from school to work suggests that the individual pursuit of educational credentials is becoming more important, then the re-composition of the occupational class structure has also coincided with major changes in the ethnic and gender basis of the workforce and a decline of a labour market dominated by the white working class male. The changing relationship between girls/young women and qualifications is evident in the two case studies in chapter 7.

Raffe suggests that rather than seeing education as being something that contributes directly to an individual's productivity in the work place, we should see the demand for educational qualifications by employers as being solutions to 'information problems.' He argues that as employers lack reliable information about the future ability of the individual to perform well in a job, they tend to rely on qualifications gained at school as a 'proxy' measure. (Raffe 1988, p 59). Collins (1979), on the other hand, maintains that the growth of 'credentialism' is also a consequence of the need for increasingly large, impersonal and bureaucratic organisations to establish greater normative control over their current workforce.

According to Macewan, when a firm hires a person with a high school diploma or an associate's degree, the firm knows what it means. If the schools do their job well, they eliminate a costly step in the hiring process (Macewan, 2000 p128). Like Raffe, Macewan is suggesting that as a result of the declining importance of the informal recruitment cultures and practices, which are sometimes referred to as 'internal' 'secondary' or 'segmented' labour markets (Moore 1986), employers will select those individuals who hold the types of qualifications that educationalists have defined as being the most important in terms of their social status, rather than those that may be regarded as the most 'useful' in the technical or occupational sense. This should not be taken to imply that secondary factors are no longer significant, but that they are less important and that credentials have taken on a much greater significance throughout the majority of the occupational structure.

### **Polarisation and the occupational structure. The service economy reconsidered**

However there are other important aspects to the changing significance of qualifications in securing a job. Though changes in production techniques have created new layers of managerial and professional employment opportunities, they have also been responsible for an increase in employment at the lower end of the service economy. Thus, if qualifications are pursued to improve one's chances of stable and secure professional or managerial employment, then the other side of the coin is that gaining qualifications provides a security against falling into what Ainley describes as a 'new rough' - a group that is generally without credentials and

dependent on 'Mcjobs' - low paid employment and semi employment at the lower end of the service sector.<sup>13</sup>

According to Schmitt (2001) for example, it is not the high tech manufacturing sector that has been the main job creator in the United States. On the contrary, it is in poorly paid jobs in the service sector, where the increase has been most significant. Schmitt argues that in 2000 job creation in the southern states where the number of high school drop outs was much higher was over five times greater than in the highly educated north-east region. Part of the reason that the level of education of the work force does not seem to matter for job creation is related, he argues, to the fact that the economy is creating plenty of low-paid, less skilled jobs. In 2000 for example, the top five fastest growing occupational categories for those between 18-24 were cashiers, waiters and waitresses, cooks, sales workers, stock handlers and baggers.

According to Castells, by 2005 in the United States, despite the continued decline in manufacturing, there will be as many low level sales and clerical workers in the twenty first century as there will be managers and professionals. (Castells, 1999, p224). According to Henwood (2003), the fastest growing occupations in the US, 40 % of the job growth will be among those in the lowest quarter of the earnings distribution. More recently still, Naomi Klein using figures produced by the US labour department, has added weight to the argument about the proliferation of a new poor by noting that of the 288 000 new jobs were created in the US during April, the

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<sup>13</sup> Ainley's reformulation of the class structure can also be compared with that of Hutton, who argues that British society is now characterised by a 30/30/40 division. (Hutton 1995 p193) A secure 40%, an increasingly insecure 'middle' and a bottom 30%..



largest new employers were 'temp' agencies providing low paid labour for the service sector (Klein, *The Guardian* 18/05/04).

### **The rise of the 'credential' society**

As relatively high levels of qualifications are now needed both to secure reliable employment and at the other extreme, to avoid marginalisation from the labour market, it could be argued that it is now appropriate to refer to the UK as a 'credential society',<sup>14</sup> (Collins 1979). According to Collins, educational credentials should be regarded as representing the 'mark of membership in a particular group' (Collins 1971). But, rather than qualifications reflecting technical skills or mirroring the functional importance of particular occupational status, they should be seen as being integral to the existence of differences in market power between occupational classes.

For Collins, pressures for technical efficiency are submerged within social struggles over positions. Collins also argues that schools are 'inefficient' places of learning as many of the skills used in managerial and professional positions are learned 'on the job' and the lengthy courses of study required by business and professional skills exist mainly to raise the status of the profession and to create barriers to entry (Collins 1979). Parkin puts forward a similar argument that:

To introduce notions of power into explanations of inequality is a useful corrective to the functionalist view...managerial and professional personnel

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<sup>14</sup> Arguably, Collins arguments formulated in the 1970s and based on the United States did not match so well with British society at that time when large numbers of students left school for employment without any qualifications.

receive higher rewards than manual labourers because they are more powerful, and not because they are more important to society....but the question which it immediately raises is why are they more powerful?...In their attempts to account for the distribution of rewards sociologists have paid scant attention to the role of the market.

(Parkin, 1972, p.20)

Thus, according to Weberian theory, the pursuit of credentials should be seen as part of a power struggle. Increasing one's stock of credentials is first and foremost the result of the need to improve one's market position. Credentials are sought by those aspiring to gain membership of an occupational group, but they can also be used by existing members of this group to construct barriers so as to their maintain market scarcity and as a way of protecting and justifying their high economic rewards. In other words as well as well as representing a mark of membership, as Parkin recognises, credentials perform a gate-keeping role.

Doctors, lawyers, academics, and professionals in general, commonly attempt to control the number of new recruits by imposing stiff entrance qualifications and insisting on long and expensive periods of training. By this and similar strategies the sitting incumbents can keep a strict control over numbers so that scarcity-value may be maintained 'artificially' over time. Comparable techniques are practiced by skilled manual occupations such as printers, where entry is controlled by the insistence on potential members serving lengthy

apprenticeships. Although long and often costly training is usually defended as an essential preliminary...there is little doubt that much of it is of little practical value.<sup>15</sup> (Parkin p.2).

Returning to the arguments about 'competence' in chapter 1 and to the NCVQ's approach in which each occupation can be defined in terms of a list of specific competencies, in the real world of the occupational order, possessing 'skill' can be equated with possessing market power.

From the Weberian perspective therefore, key aspects of 'skill' remain a social construct. From this perspective, the actual content of educational qualifications, which by using Marx's description of commodities, could be defined as their 'use value', can be seen as being less significant than their 'exchange value'. If different types and different grades of qualifications continue to correspond with positions in the occupational order then this is because particular credentials have succeeded in becoming an appropriate entrance ticket ('a mark of membership') for particular occupations. For Collins, the only major contribution of education to economic productivity is its contribution to basic skills of literacy and numeracy. Collins argues that at best only 15% of the increases in education in the US during the twentieth century can be attributed to increases in jobs with higher skill requirements (Collins, 1979, p12).

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<sup>15</sup> Green (1997 p77) reminds us that employers who benefited from apprentices providing cheap labour have also been prepared to make agreements with craft unions on the need to limit the number of apprentices and thus actively help to create 'skill shortages'

Like Marxists, more radical Weberian writers such as Parkin, have sought to explain the significance of occupational/class cultures in allowing privileged groups to be able to pass on advantages to successive generations. Other theorists have fused Weberian and Marxist concepts to develop the idea of educational qualifications constituting 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1977). Thus, like the Marxist correspondence theorists Bowles and Gintis, Bourdieu describes how educational institutions 'reproduce' class divisions. They do this by lowering the aspirations of those destined for low positions in the production process.

### **Credential Inflation**

Jobs done 10 years ago by 16-year old school-leavers were those with A-levels doing five years ago. Now it's graduates (Smithers 1998)<sup>16</sup>

From the Weberian perspective 'credential inflation' can be seen as an inevitable consequence of a situation where, as individuals and groups seek to increase the amount of credentials they hold, the growth in the total number of credentials continues to outstrip the increases in the technological advances and the skill requirements of production. A further consequence is that in order to protect their privileged position, elite groups continually alter the nature of what those who aspire to join them are required to seek. Thus, as noted above, rather than reflecting a shortage of technical skills, increases in the qualification requirements of particular occupations reflect social struggles over positions. The growth of credential inflation

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<sup>16</sup> Professor Alan Smithers quoted in the *Sunday Times* 28/05/1998.

will also be greatly intensified in conditions of a slacker labour market, or as a result of the traditional avenues of employment for young people ceasing to exist.

According to Mason (2001), there is evidence of employers deliberately substituting graduates for non-graduates. The main areas where graduate substitution has occurred being IT/computing, design engineering and sales/marketing). For Mason, surveys have continued to show there is an increasing dissatisfaction amongst employers, with school leavers. Yet as Rikowski (2000) observes, employer criticism of young people has continued unabated regardless of market conditions and that the increased level of qualifications that young people may now be able to offer, need not imply that employers will appear to be any more contented with young people as potential employees. On the contrary, Rikowski argues that employer complaints about the quality of school-leavers seem perennial, perhaps as old as the dawn of capitalism itself. But if it is correct to see employers' attitudes towards young people as representing part of a more general reflection of broader social attitudes to young people, rather than representing a rational judgement from employers about their skill deficiencies, it should also be recognised that employer hostility can become even more intensified in periods of labour market slack. During the 1980s, a period of high unemployment, the criticism of young workers became particularly noticeable. As a result, even in a period when more and more young people become increasingly better qualified, in times of recession, young people can be seen to be 'in crisis' and largely responsible for their inability to find proper employment. In fact, rather than educational credentials being used as a substitute for a lack of information about the qualities of a young potential recruit - as Raffe

suggests, Rikowski argues that statements which attempt to outline employer needs in relation to youth labour are at best ambiguous and at worst 'downright contradictory.' Employers may often appear to be dissatisfied with what they get from young people but as Rikowski concludes, dissatisfied employers often do not know what they want (Rikowski, 2000c, p1). After looking at evidence from the graduate labour market however, Mason notes that when graduates have been substituted for non-graduates, a significant minority of employers are unable to identify any improvement in performance resulting from this substitution process. Arguably, because the supply of intermediate trained workers can be severely restricted by the fact that large numbers now progress to degree level education as a result of the rewards that it is perceived to bring, then credential inflation is likely to be an inevitable consequences. But just as the school sixth formers described in the next chapter, regarded the GNVQ as a way of climbing the ladder to further qualifications and, rather than enabling them to acquire a particular skill or providing access to a particular job, was something that improved their overall employment chances, a 1990 government report on 'Highly Qualified People' estimated that 'a degree was considered essential for only one third of the jobs to which employers had recently recruited new graduates' (quoted in Ainley 1994, p16.).

Other writers have argued that credential inflation is intensified by disequilibria in the labour market. Thus for Thurow (1988), a situation where there is a lack of demand for labour by employers as a whole, can be best understood through a 'labour queue' theory.<sup>17</sup> Failure to secure employment has meant that young people,

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<sup>17</sup> Quoted by Shelley, 1988 page 103

particularly those who have traditionally been at the back of the queue have had to revise plans about finishing their education early. According to Shelly, hiring standards rise as employers use educational credentials to ration jobs. Young people, particularly those who are at the back of the queue, have little choice but to seek more qualifications. As a result, it could also be argued that a new sense of enforced urgency amongst young people<sup>18</sup> is at least as significant in explaining increased performance in examinations, as government attempts to 'improve' school delivery<sup>19</sup>. In the last decade of the twentieth century for example, the number of school students obtaining five or more GCSE grades rose from 35% to 48% (DfEE 2000 p43). 88.5% achieved at least five A-G grades and only 6.0% failed to achieve any GCSE grade at all.(DfEE Nov 1999). The increasing importance of credentialism in the labour market also leads to arguments and accusations about the consistency of standards in those qualifications that are most valued. For example, as will be argued later, the dramatic increase in A-level students during recent years has led to allegations about 'dumbing down' and calls for the tightening of assessment practices.<sup>20</sup> As also argued later, this has as much to do with the maintenance of public confidence over examinations as it does with concerns about the particular advantages and disadvantages of particular assessment methods. As the chapters that follow about

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<sup>18</sup> Martin Walker *The Guardian* 18/8/98 identifies a new 'recession consciousness' amongst young people.

<sup>19</sup> The relationship between 'structure' and 'agency' is examined in chapter 7.

<sup>20</sup> See for example the investigation in to English, mathematics and chemistry, *Standards in Public Examinations* 1975 to 1995 (OFSTED 1996) and also the sections of the Dearing Review of post-16 qualifications about the need to maintain the 'rigour' of A-levels by reducing the number of syllabus and by restricting the use of modular assessment (1996 page 82)

changes to particular qualifications will argue, they reflect the contradictory nature of these qualifications.

### **Academic and vocation qualifications. Different horses for different courses?**

As the absolute level of credentials held across the population continues to increase, Collins argues that the relative inequalities between different occupational groups are also likely to increase. For Collins, the most prestigious credentials are likely to be those that most closely reflect elite culture. Thus, a further consequence of the lack of connection between educational credentials and technical skills is that qualifications that are seen to be strictly 'vocational' have lower status than 'academic' qualifications associated with the elite (Collins, 1979, p.16).

Collins argues that people with vocational qualifications generally do no better in the workplace than those without them as skills for work are learned primarily in the workplace. It can also be the case, he maintains, that having vocational qualifications can prove to be a disadvantage. He argues that institutions specialising in vocational qualifications may become identified as places where 'youthful troublemakers' (Collins 1979, p17) are sent to remove them from regular schools. Thus, even if a student may learn some valuable skills a future employer may see them as having 'bad character.'

While students on Advanced level GNVQ courses are unlikely to be regarded as troublemakers by future employers, Collins general arguments about the status of vocational qualifications are significant because, as the chapters that follow show, educational modernisers have sought to reduce the difference in status between



vocational and academic learning and as a result the Advanced level GNVQ has become reclassified as a vocational A-level. Section two examines the evolution of GNVQ policy in relation to other qualifications. It argues that rather than reflecting the needs of the workplace, the changes to GNVQ and in particular its subsequent evolution into a vocational A-level incorporating some of the features of academic qualifications, have been the consequence of an attempt to improve its value as a credential and ensure that students are able to use it to drift up the educational system. This has continued to put pressure on a qualification that, as chapter 2 argues, was designed to 'cool out' a new group of post-16 learners but which has been used by these students to 'drift up' the education system.

## Chapter 2

### Vocational Education and the State

The previous chapter sought to provide the context for explaining the changing relationship between young people and qualifications. This chapter argues that the increased participation in education by young people, beyond the statutory requirements has resulted in the need for a new 'settlement' in education particularly at post-16. Following on from what has been argued in the second half of chapter 1 about the weak relationship between vocational education and securing employment, the chapter argues that its major focus is that of social control. Though there are similarities with Collins theory of the credential society, the theoretical perspective in this chapter is a Marxist one. Rather than concentrating on the social struggle over credentials between individuals and groups in the way that Weberian analysis does, the chapter addresses the issue of the changing relationship between education and the state<sup>21</sup>.

Those writing in the Gramscian tradition in the sociology of education have developed the concept of 'settlement'. (Jones, 1989; 2003, Green 1990, CCCS 1981, 1991). Rejecting the Bowles and Gintis argument that the structure of education reflects the social relations of the workplace, the Gramscian approach concentrates on

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<sup>21</sup> Collins does address education and the state briefly, in his discussion of 'credential Keynesism' (p196). Here he refers to the significance of government expenditure on education as a way of maintaining aggregate demand. He also refers to the explicit recognition that 'education creates an artificial credential currency'.

examining specific historical state formations. According to Green these constitute 'complex processes of mediation and alliance which are irreducible to particular economic contradictions' (Green, 1990 p92).

In the Gramscian approach, particular historic state formations are a consequence of the need to create 'class settlements.' - these reflect the balance of forces at state level and represent a strategic response by the ruling class to the problem of maintaining legitimacy. For example a new settlement may appear to make concessions to the working class as a way of securing the longer-term interests of the ruling class. Thus, the 1944 Education Act while providing free secondary education, as part of a wider post-war settlement around social provision and the construction of a welfare state, also divided students into grammar, technical and secondary modern schools. Changes in state education policy reflect the need to fortify a particular settlement, but also, over a longer term, they reflect the necessity to establish a new one.

For Ainley (1988), the introduction of new qualifications and the development of new types of education and training, should be seen as being a response at state level to the collapse in the employment opportunities for young people. An examination of educational history illustrates there is often an inverse relationship between the emergence of new types of qualifications and the employment opportunities of the groups for whom the new qualifications are designed. While at an official level the introduction and the continued expansion of the CSE in the 1960s for example, was justified in terms of the CSE providing a distinctive qualification for those seeking to enter skilled trades, a way of distinguishing these young people from those entering

unskilled employment, according to Ainley, the growth of the CSE took place at a time when, on the contrary, the number of apprenticeships was beginning to fall.

According to Moore, there can be a 'fundamental discontinuity' (Moore, 1984 p65) between the official aims of national initiatives and the political realities of the classroom. For Moore, the growth of vocational education courses in schools during the 1970s had little to do with the teaching of new work skills but was instead a response to a crisis of legitimacy in schools. In particular, the raising of the school leaving age at the beginning of the 1970s resulted in the changing composition of the school population. According to Moore, programmes that grew up from the early 1970s around the 'world of work' were a response to control problems in schools - the need to accommodate a new cohort of students remaining in school post-RSLA. In this chapter it will be argued that rather than representing a strategy for 're skilling' the workforce, the emergence of full time vocational qualifications in schools and colleges during the 1970s and 1980s which preceded current vocational qualifications like GNVQ, were a response to the breakdown of traditional patterns of transition from school to work.

### **The collapse of the 1944 Settlement**

As argued earlier, the 1944 post-war settlement was based on extending secondary education through the tripartite system in which different types of secondary provision were considered appropriate for different types of students. However, for much of the post war period, as the previous chapter has noted, large numbers of working class students continued to leave school without any qualifications and at the

earliest opportunity. The attraction of leaving school was enhanced by the vastly improved material conditions for working class youth in the post-war period. (Willis 1977, Finn, 1987). Willis and Finn have described the responses of working class youth and their opposition to having to remain in school as a result of the decision to raise the school leaving age in 1971-2.

The reasons for the collapse of the 1944 settlement have been addressed in detail by a number of writers (Jones 1989; 2003, Green 1990, CCCS 1981; 1991). The disintegration of the post-war settlement coincided with the collapse of post war prosperity, which resulted in schools being criticised for not being responsive enough to the needs of the economy and for failing to prepare young people for the world of work. The collapse of the 1944 settlement resulted in changes in the way that education was carried out at state level. For example, it resulted in an offensive against 'progressive' education and calls for a return to more of an emphasis on 'basics.' (Jones 1983, CCCS 1981). One of the other consequences was the increasing influence of a new state quango, the Manpower Services Commission, across education and training.

### **Training without jobs**

The late 1970s and the 1980s saw periods of high unemployment amongst school leavers, as a result the process of transition described in chapter 2 was disrupted. For example, while the unemployment rate during the 1950s and 1960s had averaged 1.5%, by 1975, this had risen to 3.5% and by 1977; 1.3 million were registered as

being out of work. More significantly, if unemployment as a whole increased by 45% between 1972 and 1977, for those under twenty it increased by 120% (Finn, p114). In 1984 youth unemployment, (not including those on training schemes) rose to 27%. According to Ferri:

The transition from school to work for young people in the 1980s became more difficult than at any time in post-war Britain....Manufacturing industry was a mainstay of the apprenticeship system, so its decline in the 1980s saw the numbers entering apprenticeships fall from 290,000 in 1975 to 45,000 by 1996. In contrast, numbers on the new YTS averaged over 400,000 over the period 1983 to 1989. (Ferri *et al* 2003, p35)

The growth of Youth Training initiatives and the increased role of the Manpower Services Commission during this period should be seen as a failed attempt to reconstitute a new settlement. Despite the progressive rhetoric of MSC initiatives about the needs of the 'new worker,' this was a period that Finn has characterised as constituting Training Without Jobs. ' It did not constitute a serious attempt at confronting a rapidly changing economic structure, or at promoting a modern and effective training culture. Youth Opportunities Programs (YOPs) were created by the Labour government of the 1970s 'largely to keep young people off the streets' (Ferri, *et al*, p 3).

Though in the early 1980s the new Youth Training Scheme (YTS) was being promoted by the Conservatives as a 'permanent bridge into work' and as an initiative

at the forefront of economic progress (Finn, p161), according to Finn, government primarily pumped money into the MSC to contain, but not avert the continuing political crisis of mass youth unemployment.

### **Education without work**

For Ainley, the period since 1987, when the Education Reform Act was passed, has resulted in a learning policy that can be described as 'Education without jobs.' Emerging in the shadow of the failure of the MSC initiatives, he argues that the changes in learning policy represents the introduction of the American model of extended education, in place of the German dual system of education and training which was the model promoted by the MSC. For Ainley, this new period should be seen as a more concerted and long term attempt at creating a settlement, where with the decline of full-time employment, the extension of education and training in the form of 'lifelong learning,' is becoming a replacement for the social control formerly exercised in the workplace (Ainley, 1999, p21).

According to Ainley a new 'Learning State' has replaced the old corporate 'Welfare State'. Whereas the legitimacy of the latter depended on securing a class settlement around full employment, in what were very different economic conditions, the Learning State has the job of securing social order and of effectively managing the consequences of the lack of stable employment opportunities and the increased economic insecurities of young people which have been the result of the collapse of manufacturing industry and the apprenticeship system that depended on it. These

developments, he argues, have been intensified by the globalisation of the economy and the internationalisation of labour markets. These have also resulted in changes in the process of transition from education to employment and in the relationship between young people and educational qualifications.

During the post-war period for example, the terms 'school leaver' and 'working class' became synonymous (Ainley, 1999, p41). According to Ainley, the aim of current policy, is to shift the proportion of those staying on compared to those leaving full time education from a 20:80 ratio to one of 80:20. If this strategy has its origins in the 1987 Education Reform Act and the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act introduced by the Conservatives, then under New Labour the new settlement is being 'deepened and extended' (Ainley, 1999, p157). Nowhere is this more apparent than in the dramatically increased participation rates for post-16 education.

According to Ainley, the increased participation in education maintains the division between the certified majority and an uncertified 'rough' - those who as a result of a lack of qualifications are destined for a life of 'Mcjobs,' casualised employment/semi-employment in the increasing number of low waged jobs at the lower end of the service sector. For Ainley:

The new respectable working-middle class lives in disdain and fear of the new poor 'underclass' into which accident or illness, redundancy or the lack of sufficient qualifications and connection scan so easily pitch them (Ainley, 1999, p.174).



### **From vocational training to vocational pathways**

But while the Learning State credentialises the majority and socially excludes the rough, a major function of the learning arrangements is to ensure that divisions continue between those young people who continue in education.

The new learning policy ...has little to do with the economy, which is its rationale.... It seeks both to return to the old social and cultural conditions between traditional 'middle' and 'working' classes that were entrenched in the original post war settlement (Ainley, 1999, p24)

The rest of this chapter examines the differences between particular types of qualifications and between different groups of students. It argues that the most important divisions are those between academic and vocational learning.

The 1996 Dearing Review of post-16 qualifications, commissioned by the outgoing Conservative administration, while recognising that there may be areas of commonality between vocational and academic learning, clearly stated that it would be wrong to undermine the distinctive purpose being served by the two qualifications (Dearing Review p17). By 2000 however, the Secretary of State of a now combined Department for Education and Employment, was to be more precise.

My Department is working to create a single respected vocational route, and to complete a strong ladder of progression from age 14 or 15, up to foundation degree and beyond. (David Blunkett, *Opportunities for All*, DfEE. 2000b, p.10)

The above document, a response by the Secretary of State to the *National Skills Task Force Report*, identified the past failure to develop high quality vocational training as the reason for poor national economic performance. As is clear from the extract below, it sought to explain how the vocational route would stand between academic and work-based learning.

In the future, vocational study for young people will consist of two main pathways: broad based vocational study in school or college leading to vocational A-levels or BTEC...and apprenticeships which in future will include taught knowledge and understanding as well as competence developed on the job.... The Secretary of State is anxious to emphasise that work placed learning for young people should still be seen as important however the importance of work placed training in the lives of young people in this country has become significantly reduced. (*Opportunities for All*, p 10).

### **GNVQ: schooling a new middle?**

Gleeson and Hodkinson (1999) have suggested that the GNVQ be seen as the latest in a long series of attempts to establish a more distinctive education for the 'middle' of the secondary school population. They argue that within 20th century English education policy, the emphasis has been directed at either the 'top' or the 'bottom' of the school population and that despite the setting up of technical schools in the 1944

the school population and that despite the setting up of technical schools in the 1944 Education Act, the reality of the post-war tripartite system was a 'dual' system of grammar (non manual) and secondary modern (manual) schools, rather than one with a distinct middle or technical stream.

In the context of the post-war government intentions, this would appear an accurate description. The number of senior (secondary) technical schools never increased above the 300 mark and by the 1950s technical schools had declined in number (Wolf, 2002). In 1953 the number of students in technical schools was no more than 4% of the secondary school population. At the same time, for example, over 60% of German students of the same age were being educated in vocational schools.

Raggatt and Williams also argue that the influence exerted by officials from the Department for Education and Science (DES) in shaping the direction of full time vocational qualifications like GNVQ was much greater than those from the Employment Department. They argue that DES officials 'took the lead' (Raggatt and Williams 1999, p127) and that this was a consequence of a change in policy. From the middle of 1990 onwards, rather than concentrating on ways to make A-levels broader and more accessible to greater numbers of students, through for example, adopting the proposals from the Higginson Committee,<sup>22</sup> government strategy focused on creating parallel vocational courses, for those not considered to be suited

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<sup>22</sup> The Higginson Committee proposed amongst other things that there should be a decrease in the number of different A-levels but that syllabus should be broader, that students should take more subjects, that A-levels should put more emphasis on developing skills

<sup>22</sup> See *Labour's programme* (1983)

to further academic study (Raggatt and Williams, p125).

Though Raggatt and Williams go no further than concluding that these changes in policy were the result of a 'political reluctance' to reform A-levels (p135), their detailed account of policy developments confirms Ainley's arguments about the shift from vocational training to vocational education. The next section of this chapter will examine how, for example, increased staying on rates challenged the nature of the traditional school sixth-form.

#### **Staying on: the changing nature of school sixth forms.**

The increased participation in post-16 education has been particularly reflected in both the growth of school sixth forms and in their changing composition. The expansion of sixth forms has also been assisted by a reversal of previous government policy on post-16 provision. Rather than continuing with the Labour policy of promoting tertiary colleges, a development seen as being integral to the 'comprehensivisation' of post-16 education (Benn & Chitty, 1996), Conservative governments of the late 1980s and 1990s began to encourage schools to develop, even re-open sixth forms, even if this was to at the expense of an existing tertiary sector.

The new school funding arrangements that were introduced in the 1988 Education Act, where the size of the school's budget depended on the number of students, meant that recruitment of new types of sixth form students became both increasingly attractive and increasingly essential for Headteachers struggling to balance school accounts. Like the divisions between higher education institutions described later,

school sixth forms have increasingly become divided between those who are able to 'select' their students and those who depend on being able to 'recruit'. Arguably, in many cases, the differences between sixth forms are becoming as significant as the differences between sixth forms and the further education sector.

In England in 2000, there were still more 16-18 year olds in the FE sector than in schools. Though there were 300, 000 16-18 students in sixth forms, this was less than half the number in colleges (TES 23/02/04), although the college total of 650 000 included those attending one of the 103 sixth form colleges.<sup>23</sup> However, considering that they only exist in about half of state secondary schools, it is in sixth forms that the growth of post-16 participation has been most reflected. If there has been a continued expansion in the number of FE students, then it is the increase in 'older' students that has been particularly significant. According to the TES (19/11/99), the total under 19 FE student population now represents only 19% of the total FE full time student population. The implications of this are addressed later in this chapter.

If there has been an increase in the total number of sixth forms, there has also been a growth in their size. Sixth forms where there are more than 200 students are becoming commonplace, with some schools carrying sixth forms over 400. The DfEE *Sixth Consultation Document* issued as part of the 2000 *Learning to Succeed* White Paper reports that a third of sixth forms are now in this category. As a result of the transfer of responsibility for post 16-funding to Learning and Skills Councils, there has also been concern about the financial viability of some sixth forms, particularly those remaining small or medium sized or where there are other providers

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<sup>23</sup> In many respects Sixth Form colleges are an extension of the school system in that they have generally been established where school sixth forms do not exist. For an overview see Benn and Chitty (1996), chapter 9.

of post 16 education in the locality.<sup>24</sup> Yet the data contained in the next chapter would suggest that despite the higher costs of educating students in school sixth forms, there are strong socio-economic reasons for their continued existence.

Neave reminds us of the historical roots of the sixth form. English sixth formers he suggests, unlike students at equivalent stages in France and the US, have constituted an elite. Neave argues that the ethos of the sixth form in the post war period has been closely associated with the 'formation of leaders' (Neave, 1975, p 6) and that grammar school sixth forms reflected 'an institution born of an aristocratic tradition' (Neave, p 26) one modelled on the English public schools.

For example, sixth formers have been allowed a significant degree of autonomy, not only in terms of dress, where non uniformed sixth forms are common place, but also sixth form councils or committees have been given control over certain aspects of their school life. In the past, sixth formers in state schools, like their contemporaries in private schools have been involved in the disciplinary side of the school through the prefect system. More relaxed relationships between students and staff have also been encouraged.

But to what extent has comprehensive education changed the nature of the sixth form? Neave was relatively optimistic about the way in which the new 'open' comprehensive school sixth form would signal a departure from that of the traditional grammar school (Neave, p29). However, some twenty years later, Benn & Chitty, in their general review of comprehensive reforms in the post war period, argue that despite the emergence of a 'new sixth' in the 1970s/1980s comprising students taking

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<sup>24</sup> The TES 23/02/01 reported that on average, FE colleges spent up to £1500 less per student, compared to schools

or re sitting GCE O-level and/or following CPVE, post-16 education has continued to be the Achilles heel of comprehensive education. Sixth forms have continued to be identified with academic education and further education colleges with vocational training (Benn & Chitty, 1996).

According to Benn and Chitty, elite criticism of the comprehensive idea forced schools to collude with rather than seek to challenge established practices, because ensuring their students passed A-levels was the only way they could establish their own academic credibility, even if it was clear that the dominance of external exams for a minority was preventing the development of 16-19 education for the majority. For Benn and Chitty, comprehensive sixth forms represented a 'social contradiction' (Benn and Chitty, 1996 p350). Though they noted the significant progress that had been made towards tertiary reorganisation they also criticised the academic emphasis of many of the new sixth form colleges. Benn and Chitty refer to these as 'A level academies', which drew on a largely middle class clientele (Benn and Chitty, 1996, p.352). They contrast them to the working class nature of the Further Education sector.

### **The growth of the 'vocational' sixth form**

If the number of A- level students and the number of A- level courses available in sixth forms has continued to increase, then of particular significance has been the rise of a much larger 'vocational' sixth than existed previously. As a result the situation is quite different to when Benn & Chitty argued that the 'new sixth' which had grown from the end of the 1970s had been too small to challenge the established sixth form

ethos. Though an increasingly large number of sixth forms had previously offered BTEC and CPVE qualifications, the full time pre-vocational qualifications that GNVQs sought to replace, schools became eager to establish GNVQ courses so as to cater for those students not considered to be A-level candidates.

The increased size of sixth forms and the changes in the curriculum have also resulted in situations where some staff now spend most, if not all of their time teaching in post 16 education. This was the case with teachers who taught across a variety of post-16 courses in the Vocational Faculty at *Inner London* School. This was also true at *Anglia*; the other *school* sixth form used in the case study in section three.

The case study evidence will argue that even though there is some evidence of a desire by some students to leave the 'custodial' regime of the school and move on to the 'freedom' associated with college, (Ainley & Bailey 1997), there are also clear reasons why many working class students in particular decided to stay on in their school sixth forms instead. Though Smith (*General Educator* No 30, 1994) has argued that from an administrative point of view, schools are more suited to delivering Intermediate level rather than Advanced GNVQ courses, it is clearly the case that the rapid expansion of GNVQ courses in schools, and particularly in areas like Advanced level business, is the result of the needs of schools to respond to changes in the school population in the way that Moore described the growth of post RSLA courses. The Savory, Hodgson, Spours *Curriculum 2000* case studies referred to in the chapter that follows, also provide further evidence of this.



As a result of competition from local colleges, but also from other local schools, the difficulty for 'recruiter' sixth forms has been having to create their own institutional settlement, which allows them to be able to both keep their A-level students, while ensuring that they also provide for the new sixth. This has required them to ensure that the academic tradition of the sixth form has continued and that the organisation of academic and vocational courses remain separate. The 1997 FEDA/Institute of Education research referred to earlier, showed that 25% of 16 year olds started vocational courses like GNVQ and 2000 schools registered as GNVQ centres. Almost 40% of Intermediate and 27% of Advanced students remained in schools (FEDA/loE. p.70).

This is not to argue that there are no longer differences in the pattern of provision between schools and FE sector. According to the FEDA research, the vocational sixth form is more likely to be largely a 'business studies' sixth (FEDA, p18). According to the Awarding Bodies statistics for July 1998, almost 40% of Advanced students and 25% of Intermediate students do business. The only other areas really well established being Leisure and Tourism and Health and Social Care.

According to DfEE figures for 1997<sup>25</sup>, about 40 % of those 16-18 year olds in full time education (55% of cohort) were studying A or AS levels and over half are in school sixth forms with about 15% in FE. About 12% (30 % of these in schools) were on Advanced GNVQs and another 9% (40% in schools) on Intermediate courses. More recent estimates from the DfEE *Curriculum 2000* sample referred to in section three showed that 13% of all Advanced students in school sixth forms were on GNVQ courses. 18% were in Sixth Form Colleges and 29% were in further

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<sup>25</sup> DfES Statistical Review [www.dfes.gov.uk](http://www.dfes.gov.uk).

education . Using this data it is possible to estimate the size of the vocational sixth in the late 1990s, as being in the region of 70, 000. According to the FEDA/Nuffield figures half of Advanced GNVQ students had transferred from Intermediate level.

The national surveys of GNVQ students have not, to my knowledge, included specific data about occupational/class background. However, the FEDA data does show that those students who start Advanced level vocational courses, particularly those like business studies had significantly lower academic qualifications than those who started A-levels. The absence of Foundation level GNVQ courses in schools has also meant that students can generally start Intermediate GNVQ with minimal qualifications. (In *Inner London* sixth form for example, with the exception of a small Access course designed essentially for students who often had to learn English at the same time, there was no other provision below Intermediate GNVQ).

If Gleeson and Hodkinson considered that the GNVQ represented an attempt to create a middle stream, then in terms of the policy proposals from the DfEE referred to at the beginning of this chapter, GNVQ courses increasingly occupy a middle point in a vocational route stretching from 14 years into higher education. The remainder of this chapter briefly outlines some of these developments.

#### **Key Stage Four divisions: Vocational GCSEs**

From the late 1990s there was to be a reversal of government policy at Key Stage 4 (14-16 education). The 1987 Education Reform Act (ERA) marked the end of any further attempts to expand the work related curriculum for those who were in the final

years of compulsory schooling. The ERA introduced a ten subject National Curriculum for all students at Key Stage 4 and the National Curriculum effectively ended the Technical and Vocational Educational Initiative in schools. (Ainley, 1990). TVEI was another initiative from the Manpower Services Commission. Though some critics saw it as a 'Trojan horse' (Chitty, 1986). An attempt to create a technical stream within secondary education and to import MSC style training into schools, for others TVEI also provided opportunities for schools to develop cross ability vocational education (Dale *et al*, 1990).

Yet by the early 1990s, as a consequence of the boycott of the National Curriculum tests for 7 to 14 year olds by teacher unions, Sir Ron Dearing had been commissioned to review the National Curriculum. In response to concerns by teachers about the overloading of the curriculum and student disaffection, he produced proposals to free up Key Stage 4, by reducing the number of statutory subjects. Dearing proposed the introduction of vocational alternatives for 14 year olds. Schools would also soon be given permission to 'disapply' individual students from particular National Curriculum subjects, such as modern languages and a variety of initiatives began to emerge where school students could either attend FE colleges for part of the week or undertake extended work placements.

One of the most significant development was the introduction of a GNVQ part one qualification. The new award was designed to take up approximately 20% of curriculum time. However the progress of GNVQ part one continued to be slow. By 1998 for example, awarding body figures showed that only 6267 16 year olds had completed a Part One. In October 2000, QCA announced the introduction of a

vocational GCSE (VCSE). It was proposed that these would replace not only Part One, but also all Intermediate and Foundation GNVQ courses in post-16 education. VCSEs, soon to be called 'applied' GCSEs were introduced in eight subject areas although they drew heavily from the existing Intermediate GNVQ specifications. Like GNVQ Part One, VCSEs were designed to be double awards, being equivalent to two GCSEs.

### **The 14-19 Green Paper.**

In 2002 the government published a Green Paper on 14-19 education. *14-19: extending opportunities, raising standards*, set out a much more ambitious program for differentiating learners from age 14. It marked a further retreat from the 10-subject National Curriculum of the Education Reform Act and instead laid the foundations for the development of distinct pathways. It proposed a mandatory 'core' for key stage 4, restricted to English, maths, science and ICT alongside citizenship, RE, PE, sex education and work related learning. Modern foreign languages, technology and humanities would now have the status of 'entitlements' in that schools would in future only be required to offer minimum provision in these subjects to those students choosing them. Like most other Labour policy documents, its proposal for varying the KS4 curriculum continued to be justified in terms of an increasingly diversified world of work. Thus, accompanying material from QCA emphasised the importance of responding to the 'individual interests and aptitudes' of young people.

However, the examples of career progression that were used in the Green Paper stood in sharp contrast to the post-Fordist and moderniser arguments outlined in the opening chapter. Rather than breaking down curriculum divisions, they mapped out extended and narrow learning pathways. For example:

A 14 year old who wants a career in the hotel and catering industry may choose a Hospitality and Catering vocational GCSE, in a program involving practical activity in the workplace and vocational study at a nearby college...at 16 he or she might take vocational A-levels in Hospitality and Catering, Business and ICT, leading to a Foundation degree in Hotel Management. (Green Paper, 4.45)

Significantly, the 14-19 Green Paper began with a reference to the 1944 Act. Whereas in the past, Labour policy had concentrated on abolishing the divisive nature of a tripartite curriculum in the upper years of secondary education, the objective was now not to end vocational-academic divisions, but to improve the status of vocational education, compared with academic study. This was something which the Green Paper considered to be a fundamental weakness of the 1944 Act.

In its discussion of vocational alternatives, The Green Paper went no further than re emphasising the importance of Vocational GCSEs as a way of extending choice for young people. However restricting the size of the mandatory curriculum creates the space for the emergence of a third tier of key stage 4 learners. Students who will take neither academic or vocational GCSEs but whose education will be reduced to what

is essentially a basic skills curriculum (Allen, 2004a).

The new proposals for greater curriculum differentiation from age 14 have also been accompanied by greater differentiation between schools themselves. This is the result of government proposals to expand the specialist schools program. Under this scheme, schools are encouraged to develop excellence in their specialist subjects and to 'forge a distinctive mission and ethos which is right for their school' (DfES, 2003 p 11). The government proposes that there will be at least 2000 specialist schools in the secondary sector by 2006, in addition to new City Academies.<sup>26</sup> Before schools can become specialist, they must be able to raise £50,000 from private sponsors and show that they have expertise in particular areas. Poorer schools in inner city areas are less likely to be able to do this, but may become specialist by default; being left to concentrate on a largely vocational/ skills based curriculum, while other, more prosperous schools, become arts, languages, science or technology centres (Allen 2003).

### **Elite universities for the few. Mass universities for the many**

#### **New divides within higher education**

He'd never heard of GNVQ and he asked me if I was a British citizen.

I was so embarrassed!<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> For further details of government proposals for differentiating schools see the DfES *Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners* (2004).

<sup>27</sup> Rajitha an Inner London GNVQ student reporting her experiences at a 'selecting' university.

About 40% of young people below twenty-one participate in some form of higher education in this country as government aims for a 50% participation rate for 18-30 year olds by the end of the decade. The above comments from one of the GNVQ students at *Inner London School* featured in the next chapter, about her interview for a place on law degree at a leading West London university is just one small example of how higher education is now an increasingly differentiated sector in which students with vocational qualifications almost without exception, enter what will later be referred to as 'recruiting' universities rather than those able to 'select.'<sup>28</sup> These divisions also broadly equate with divisions between the post-1992 institutions that as a consequence of the 1992 Act, were upgraded from college of higher education or polytechnic status. They also equate with the division between universities that are primarily associated with research and those concentrating on teaching.

The UCAS statistics referred to in the chapter that follows show, for example, that amongst the post-1992 universities popular with the *Inner London* students in the case study material, Middlesex had a blue-collar intake of 31%, North London 33% London Guildhall 33% and Thames Valley 33%. In comparison, the London School of Economics had 4% and University College London 8%. In terms of the changes in the class structure outlined in chapter 2 and using Ainley's model of class recomposition, the post-1992 institutions could in the future be characterised as 'universities for the working middle.'

If, as was argued at the beginning of the chapter, UK learning arrangements are now based on an American model rather than on the German/European

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<sup>28</sup> UCAS statistics for 1999 showed for example that Russell Group universities had yet to accept a GNVQ student.

education/training dichotomy, then the growth of 'mass universities for the many,' combined with 'elite universities for the few' (Ainley 1999, p139), increasingly reflects the situation in American higher education. The fact that universities will in future also be able to charge fees of up to £3000, as opposed to the current £1000 per annum also greatly increases the potential for further differentiation in the HE sector. The effect of increased fees on student decisions will be addressed in the final chapter.

### **'Degrees of difference'**

Alongside the institutional differentiation of higher education the government is also continuing with proposals to develop Foundation 'degrees' - a vocationally focussed two-year degree, awarded by universities, but largely provided through Further Education colleges. As a result of the increased significance of school sixth-forms and sixth-form colleges in educating 16-19 year olds, FE may be increasingly destined to serve an 'adult' population. Here there are similarities with the American model described earlier with Further Education representing the UK equivalent of the US Community College. The twenty-two foundation degree areas listed on the DfES website include aircraft engineering, police studies and classroom assistants. The DfES briefing notes carefully identify who foundation degrees are aimed at and where they fit into the newly expanding HE sector.

The foundation degree is a vocationally focused higher education qualification.



It aims to increase the number of people qualified at higher education and associate professional level (e.g legal executives, engineering technicians, personnel officers, laboratory technicians, teaching assistants). It is located at intermediate level in the *Framework for higher education qualifications (FHEQ)*. Other intermediate level qualifications include NVQ level 4 and the HND. The next level up is 'honours' level, which covers degrees with titles such as Bachelor of Arts (BA Hons) or Bachelor of Science (BSc Hons).

(Source: [www.foundationdegree.org.uk](http://www.foundationdegree.org.uk).)

By 2002, according to Tester (*Guardian Education*, 11/09/01) 70 foundation degrees had been put in place and 4000 places filled. Institutions determine their own entrance requirements and after completing the degree earn the letters FdA and FdSc. A further 15 months study enables students to upgrade to a conventional degree.

One of the main motives for providing Foundation degrees is to broaden 'lifelong learning' by providing those already in the workforce with a new 'twilight' opportunity to learn new skills and to gain extra qualifications or follow on from the workplace based Modern Apprenticeship qualification. But, the DfEE material also emphasise that the foundation degree will be a full time qualification and could represent the culmination of the post -14 vocational route (DfEE 2000b).

### **Vocational pathways: a European snapshot.**

Despite the continued importance of the work based apprenticeship in some European

countries and notwithstanding the references to the increased similarities between British learning policy and that of the United States, the emergence of vocational pathways can also be placed in European context where, according to Green, Wolf and Leney (1999), the average age at the beginning of transfer from school to employment is now 17 years and where the average transition period lasts six years. Young people now live in an era of prolonged transition.

All European states have had to respond to similar social and economic trends and though there may remain considerable national differences over the detail of reform, there has been a major shift in the role played by 'vocational' upper secondary courses in relation to the labour market. In many other European countries these qualifications have also increasingly functioned as an alternative route through which to extend formal education, rather than providing direct occupational preparation. It is in this respect that the 'academic drift' within GNVQ, described in section two can be seen as representing a more general characteristic of vocationalism.

A second common feature of full-time vocational qualifications in Europe, is that they now have a much greater general education content. Green, Leney and Wolf argue that while this trend may be partly the result of changes in the labour market, it is also 'self-fuelling and self-perpetuating' and the result of changes in students' perception about the importance of qualifications.

This shift reflects both demand and supply pressures in the labour market in that young people expect to stay on at school longer because their aspirations are rising and because they realise that economic trends make desirable

employment increasingly dependent on achieving higher levels of qualifications. (Green, Leney and Wolf, 1999, p37)

OFSTED, in a comparative study of Denmark, Holland and New South Wales note that assessment at 16, is less of a watershed than in the UK and that as a result there are higher staying on rates and 'less of a feeling of failure' (OFSTED 2004, p3).

Finally, according to Crump (2001), the growth of vocational education at the upper end of secondary education in Australia has been primarily about encouraging people to follow specific 'pathways' rather than enter particular jobs. For Crump, 'staying on' was a policy tool forged through the Australian national qualification framework, the development of which mirrored the GNVQ and NVQ in the UK. Though in both cases the academic credential -the Higher School Certificate and A-Levels respectively - retained their higher status.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that the growth of full-time vocational education courses is the consequence of their changing role in a new educational policy which is in itself the result of changes in youth employment opportunities and the increased significance of post-16 education for young people. The chapters that follow in section two provide a more detailed policy analysis of GNVQ as it emerged in the mid 1990s as the culmination of a line of vocational qualifications, which grew up in response to changes in staying on rates. In the context of the argument in the first part of chapter 1, the next chapter (chapter three), examines the pedagogy of GNVQ. It argues that contrary

to the claims of its creators, the relationship between GNVQ and perceived changes in the workplace, has been a contradictory one. Chapter four examines the history of GNVQ as an educational credential and in particular its reconstruction as a vocational A-level at the end of the 1990s. Chapter five argues that the contradictions that have run through GNVQ have also been evident in key skills qualifications, with which GNVQ has been closely associated, while the final chapter in this section (chapter six), examines the Tomlinson working group proposals.

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## **Part Two**

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### **GNVQ: a critical history**

## **Chapter 3**

### **The origins of GNVQ**

The revolution in vocational qualifications in Britain is now gathering pace. The development of NVQs in the workplace and the introduction of GNVQs in schools and colleges are key components of achieving a learning society, which can be competitive in the global marketplace.

Alistair Graham Chairman, Training and Development Lead Body (1994)

GNVQs can provide the flexible workforce of the future, tuned in to meeting the changing needs of industry: they produce recruits who have been introduced to the knowledge and skills which will help them to adapt quickly to their employer's occupational needs.

GNVQs and Employers a recruitment guide to the new qualifications for employers in every sector (DfEE undated).

The significance of GNVQ was reflected in its consistent growth rates during the mid 1990s. In 1992 about a hundred schools and colleges piloted courses in up to five

vocational areas (Spours 1995 p7). Subsequently demand for the qualification increased rapidly. For example, according to the National Council for Vocational Qualifications annual report for 1996-1997, there were almost 200.000 registrations. Significantly, 84,000 of these were at Advanced level. According to Joint Council of Awarding Bodies figures published for the end of the 1997-98 academic year, there were over 80 ,000 active Advanced GNVQ students (those intending or expecting to finish their courses that summer). Over half of those identified would definitely complete their qualifications.

#### **GNVQs and the 'new vocationalism.'**

As the quotes at the beginning of the chapter illustrate, the GNVQ continued to be promoted as a qualification that reflected changes in work and economy. The pedagogy of the GNVQ incorporated many of the ideas about learning that had been part of the 'new vocationalism' of the 1980s. New vocationalist pedagogy was premised on ideas about the changing nature of work and the learning systems that would be needed to support it. According to Cohen, a critic of the new vocationalism:

Its supporters claim that it is a bold experiment that will turn a whole generation of school-leavers into a new kind of model worker. The new worker is to 'transcend' narrow trade practices or occupational loyalties, to be highly mobile and individualistic, infinitely adaptable to technological change (Cohen 1984 p107).

The new vocationalism argued for a radically different approach to learning. For example, rather than the curriculum being based on the teaching of 'subjects' it was now argued that it should be organised around assignment-led modules. Learning should be 'experimental' and should adopt a 'learning by doing' approach involving problem solving and collaborative activities such as group work. Pring has identified five key features of vocational courses. First there was an emphasis on processes, secondly on developing a more experienced based learning, thirdly on the profiling of various performances, using vocational studies to acquire more general qualities, fourthly on formulating 'generic' or transferable skills and finally on course design that was significantly different from those of the subject based curriculum (Pring 1995, p.62).

New vocationalist courses in schools and colleges emphasised the importance of core skills and cross-curricula work. *A Basis for Choice* (ABC) published in 1979 by the Further Education Unit established within the Department for Education and Science, emphasised negotiated objectives and provided a threefold framework - a common core, a vocational orientation and work experience. The common core incorporated a list of individual and social needs like 'practical numeracy' and 'working co-operatively.' This became the basis for 'pre-vocational' courses like the Certificate of Pre Vocational Education (CPVE) In 1984, the CPVE became available in schools and colleges. The previous year piloting of the Technical Vocational Education Initiative had begun (Jones 1989, Dale *et al.* 1990). TVEI was not a 'course' in the way CPVE and GNVQ were.



Instead it was an MSC based framework for promoting vocational learning adopted by LEAs. TVEI schemes operated on a modular basis and emphasised particular vocational themes or working skills, within which existing more subject based learning could be incorporated. More traditional vocational courses such as the BTEC National Diplomas which were designed to meet more specific vocational needs in areas such as Business and Finance, Hotel and Catering and Building and Civil Engineering, but also provided an alternative route to Polytechnic based higher education for some students, also increasingly incorporated a new vocationalist style into their programmes by including core skill units and using an 'outcomes' approach.

The influence of new vocationalism in the formation of the GNVQ should not be underestimated. According to Pring (p. 61) GNVQ was rooted in attempts by teachers to provide the best relevant general education for young people post -14 based on principles different from those of the traditional liberal-humanist perspective. GNVQs he argues, were established to be alternatives to A-levels for those who wanted a more practical and relevant extension of their learning.

Studies of GNVQ classroom practices were to provide evidence of a less hierarchical and more egalitarian classroom relationships between teachers and students. According to Edwards *et al.* (1997) for example:

When a teacher of GNVQ Business Studies in one of the visited comprehensives made herself available for advice on students' projects but did no class teaching, drew individual students' attention to their 'need to find out' but did no more than

suggest where that information might be found, she would seem to have been following the non-didactic approach so prominent in GNVQ publicity.....Viewed in this context, GNVQs appear to belong with other 'modernising' initiatives intended to shift the emphasis of schooling from teaching to learning.

(Edwards, *et al*, 1997, p22-23)

Smith suggested that GNVQ had fostered positive attitudes towards and improved student ability to be able to participate in group work and develop transferable skills. The GNVQ contained, she argued, many features that help to equip students for a 'fast changing' world (Smith, 1998 p53). Specifically, GNVQ students were encouraged to concentrate on building a 'portfolio of evidence,' rather than on absorbing knowledge simply so that it could be regurgitated in an end of year examination. Portfolio building and profiling were a central part of the new vocationalist philosophy. The need to move beyond an education system based on exams, was emphasised by commentators concerned that schools needed to change to reflect new economic realities. According to the think-tank Demos:

It is not enough for students to show they are capable of passing public examinations. To thrive in an economy defined by the innovative application of knowledge, we must be able to do more than absorb and feedback information.

(Jupp, 2002, p62)

### **Gilbert Jessop and the NCVQ**

But a more direct influence on GNVQ was the idea of ‘occupational competence’ already reflected in the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ). By the end of the 1980s, the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ), a quango set up as a result of the Government White Paper *Working Together, Education and Training* (1986) had developed a comprehensive programme of NVQs. The NCVQ was one of a number of bodies that was to emerge in the post MSC period and NVQs grew steadily during the first part of the 1990s. By 1995 over 90% of occupations had been incorporated into the NVQ framework and almost eight hundred different types of NVQ had been established.

According to Gilbert Jessop, previously an MSC official and the NCVQ’s Director of Research, the work of the NCVQ reflected the growth of a new educational paradigm, which would replace the conventional academic approaches to learning (Jessop 1991; 1995) and for which Jessop was to show a clear lack of enthusiasm:

Current and past education and training practices have been pretty inefficient. Children squander an enormous amount of time in schools, often learning little and slowly. It is not even fun...the majority of people are operating in employment, and in life generally, at far below their potential (Jessop 1991, p5).

There are some similarities between Jessop's critique of traditional forms of assessment and Brown and Lauder's attack on 'bureaucratic education' referred to in chapter 1. Both accounts provide egalitarian and progressive arguments for curriculum reform. If for Brown and Lauder, 'bureaucratic education' sought to promote the advancement of a 'talented' few while attempting to 'cool out' the majority (Brown and Lauder 1992, p12), then according to Jessop, in academic education:

The questions chosen and the system of marking adopted are designed to sort out and grade candidates from best to worst. The pass mark.... is frequently set to fail a large proportion...If the candidates improve, year-by-year, the marking is adjusted to ensure the same proportion fails (Jessop, 1991, p47).

The Manpower Services Commission's *New Training Initiative* (1981) had, Jessop argued, set out the basis for a new alternative. But in a world of changing work patterns and of technological change there was now, Jessop maintained, a need for a fundamental re-orientation. According to Jessop, the most significant feature of the New Training Initiative was the development of a new conception of 'occupational standards'.

The major impact of the 'new kind of standards', which are being introduced, is that they make explicit the outcomes sought in education and training programmes (Jessop, 1991, p11).

According to Jessop, the new 'outcomes' model, learning should be regarded as both a 'personal and individual experience' and not as something that could be 'standardized' in the old way (Jessop 1995 p.33). Thus, Jessop saw the outcomes model as both allowing and enabling individuals to reach their potential and encouraging them

to develop their skills and knowledge, to take on more responsible and fulfilling work and to earn more money (Jessop, 1991, p4).

For Jessop, the new outcomes approach represented a move away from a system that has been 'provider led' to one that was designed to be 'learner centred'

If anyone can exercise control over the process of learning, it is the individual.... it is only the individual who can make sense of the diverse inputs he or she receives...if learning is to be perceived from the viewpoint of the individual learner rather than those of the teacher one has to change the conventional model and the concepts used.

(Jessop, 1991, p4)

This approach to learning was also re-enforced by the way in which within GNVQ, students could collect different types of 'evidence.' For example, evidence could be produced through 'natural performance,' where the student was observed carrying out

a task by the assessor, by performance in specially set tasks or situations such as assignments, by oral or supplementary questioning or could be the result of 'prior experience'. Evidence could also take the form of witness statements from employers and voluntary organisations. In other words evidence did not have to be generated through direct classroom activity. However the most significant feature of the NCVQ approach to learning was the emphasis placed on learners being able to demonstrate 'competence,' showing what they could *do* rather than emphasising *what* should be taught and specifying *how* learning should take place, as had been the case with academic education (Ollin and Tucker 1994 p143). In their introduction to the NVQ and GNVQ Assessors Handbook, Ollin and Tucker characterise NVQs and GNVQs as:

Representing a major shift from the traditional model, with assessment often biased towards what people knew in theory rather than their ability to do the job and with qualifications only being achieved after attending a formal course (Ollin and Tucker, p.1)

As with the NVQ, GNVQ units were divided into 'elements of competence'. Each element was then sub-divided into a list of 'performance criteria' which according to Jessop (1991 p.16) formed a discrete activity or sub-area of competence. The performance criteria were also accompanied by a series of 'range statements' (see appendix 1), the nearest GNVQ specifications came to constituting a conventional syllabus.

Experience has shown that an element of competence is often open to different interpretations unless a more detailed specification is provided of what the element covers. Range statements simply indicate the range of application of an element. They are particularly useful in providing guidance of what needs to be covered.

(Jessop, p34, 1991)

Finally GNVQ unit specifications also contained 'evidence indicators' (see appendix 1). Evidence indicators originally sought to give some examples of what evidence could be provided. As a result of changes introduced by NCVQ in 1995 and in response to continued concerns about quality assurance, they served as the minimum evidence that students needed to produce to pass the element.

There remained concern that the NVQ was both too narrow and that the emphasis on workplace assessment was limiting the role that further education colleges, institutions now central to the implementation of national vocational initiatives, were able to play (Raggatt and Williams, 1999, p.119). Discussions continued about introducing a non-occupationally specific qualification. A 'general' NVQ and the GNVQ was officially launched in the 1991 White Paper *Education and Training for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (DES/DE 1991). The White Paper also stated that GNVQs should be 'sufficiently distinctive' from NVQs and that the differences between NVQs and GNVQs should be acknowledged. For example, according to NCVQ:

The award of a GNVQ will not imply that students can perform competently in an occupation immediately on qualifying. Students will, however, have achieved a foundation of general skills, knowledge and understanding which underpin a range of occupations (NCVQ Advice to Centres, March 1993).

In other words GNVQs were to be organised around broadly based occupational areas. They would also be offered in schools as well as in colleges. While Hyland argues that the GNVQ had 'put back learning' and that they represented a return to a more systematically planned course and would involve students carrying out assignments (Hyland, 1994, p112), the official thinking behind the qualification continued to be that GNVQs were a 'general' version of the NVQ. According to NCVQ for example:

The term General means that each GNVQ has a broad base covering a major category in the NVQ framework. For instance, the Business GNVQ covers aspects of administration, management, financial services, secretarial services and marketing. A candidate for this qualification is someone who is interested in a career in business but who has not yet decided on a particular job (GNVQ *Update* June 1992).

According to Bates (1998), there would now be a greater emphasis on the development of theoretical knowledge and understanding, rather than simply



emphasising competence. It was also the case that the basic principle of defining curricular parameters had been retained (Bates p104). If there were differences between the two qualifications then these were differences of orientation and application, rather than differences in their origins. For example, if NVQs were based on a list of occupational standards determined by the lead bodies of respective industries, then the GNVQs were to be based on 'statements of achievement' developed by the NCVQ. Each GNVQ unit (Advanced students had to complete twelve and Intermediate students needed six) was divided into 'elements of competence' and each element was also set out as a list of 'performance criteria' (becoming known to practitioners as pc's). As has been already noted, these were accompanied by a 'range' statement.

One major difference between the NVQ and the GNVQ award was that assessment for NVQs was based entirely on the ability of the student to complete practical tasks. In the GNVQ, in addition to their 'portfolio of evidence,' students also had to pass an externally set end-of unit multi-choice test - something that NCVQ originally tried to oppose. NVQs were not graded; in other words, competence was simply required to be demonstrated. In comparison, GNVQs were to be awarded at pass, merit or distinction level, even if the idea of differentiating performance would appear to sit uneasily with NVQ notions of 'competence.' The grading criteria in GNVQ were characterised as a series of 'themes' (NCVQ 1994) but they continued to reflect a pedagogy based on a 'knowing how to,' rather than the 'knowing that' approach of academic learning (see appendix 1).

To be awarded a grade, rather than simply be given a 'pass,' students had to demonstrate that one third of their portfolio evidence met the grading themes of 'action planning' 'information handling' 'evaluation' and 'quality of outcome.' The last theme was added by NCVQ in September 1994 to 'pick up on other aspects of quality work that might otherwise go un rewarded' (NCVQ 1994). Until this time there was no provision for the grading of the content GNVQs.

### **GNVQs and the reform of A-levels**

The GNVQ is producing self-motivated, independent learners who have the confidence to go into any new situation and use their initiative. You can't say that of A-levels<sup>29</sup>

Despite growing criticism and calls for a much broader curriculum at post 16, GCE A-levels continued to remain as a 'gold standard' qualification for ensuring access to both higher education and high status employment. While it was certainly the case that at A-level more subjects had become available and coursework based assessment had become established in particular subjects, even in the 1990s, two thirds of A-level entries continued to be in ten subjects. A-levels continued to be based on traditional liberal humanist assumptions about the importance of gaining 'knowledge for its own sake.' According to the Higginson Report (1988), syllabuses were 'too voluminous

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<sup>29</sup> Jane Brown, Head of Business Studies, President Kennedy School Coventry. Quoted in *The Guardian Higher Education Supplement* 14/07/98.

and candidates over-burdened with having to memorise a large amount of information to the exclusion of other demands' (Pring, 1995, p47). A-levels were criticised for their 'ideological' function (Young and Leney, 1997) and their elitist nature had, Young and Leney argued, been a major reason for post-16 participation rates being considerably lower in the UK than elsewhere. In the UK in particular they argued, academic and vocational learning were not only very different from each other, they also remained an important source of division between learners.<sup>30</sup>

According to Jessop, a system of post-16 education organised around A-levels was inappropriate for the new economic conditions (Jessop, 1991, p8). The fact that Advanced GNVQs were to be given the status, of vocational alternative to GCE A-levels was, Jessop argued, unprecedented in educational history. According to Jessop, the 1989 DES proposals to introduce core skills into A-levels represented a further significant step in the direction of creating a curriculum for the future. He argued that the 'outcomes' model of the curriculum exemplified in the NCVQ approach would be something that continued to influence the future direction of academic education.

The fear that (the outcomes model) will reduce the 'academic rigour' of A-level qualifications is not well founded. An outcome model will make it possible to define what academic rigour means (Jessop 1991, p112).

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<sup>30</sup> According to OFSTED's comparative study (see chapter 2) differences in the status of vocation-academic in Denmark and Holland were not as significant.

In contrast to linear based academic courses like GCE A-level, within GNVQs there were no time specific constraints. Although students had to complete eight mandatory and four optional units in order to obtain the Advanced level award there was to be no automatic assumption that they would do this within the two-year period that was the normal time allocated to an A-level course<sup>31</sup>. Neither would there be a limit to the number of times that students sat the short multi choice tests that were used to confirm their coverage of each mandatory unit and no link between the number of attempts at a unit test and the students' overall grade. Initially resisted by NCVQ, for Jessop, external tests only attempted to assess one set of outcomes and not the most important type of assessment (Jessop, p46, 1995).

According to Jessop, one strength of the NCVQ competence model was the desire to 'demystify' or to democratise the assessment process. For example, the NCVQ assessment model can be contrasted to the 'norm-referenced' tradition within academic education and where the achievement of candidates is judged in comparison to the achievements of others. In A-level assessment for example, candidates who reach A-grade standard are judged to be better than those who have obtained a C. This means that though there may be an expectation that a few people will reach A-grade, a much larger number will reach the middle pass grade C. If in one year it turns out that a large number of people obtain 'A' grades then there would generally be an enquiry to ensure that this situation was not repeated. It is also generally accepted by practitioners that Chief Examiners can vary grade boundaries from year to year to ensure comparability with previous years.

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<sup>31</sup> Although in practice, the logistics of school and college timetabling not to mention government expectations and funding formula meant that this would generally be the expectation

The type of assessment used in A-levels closely fits the bureaucratic/Fordist model of schooling described by Brown and Lauder. A model which is based on the assumption of there being a limited pool of talent from which to draw. According to Jessop (1995) GCE A-levels perform a 'selective' role in that they seek to identify those capable of benefiting from higher education. Rather than setting out a clear minimum standard, norm referencing only identifies who is better, or who is worse. In comparison, the NVQ and GNVQ would, Jessop argues, enable a more democratic form of assessment, one that would:

Assess the actual achievements of all who meet the standards required is not designed to differentiate students.... it is also assumed that, given time and opportunity, all students accepted on a course can reach the standard and gain the award (Jessop, 1995, p.47).

A further advantage of the NCVQ approach to assessment was that it distinguished between a student's competence in a particular task and their ability to deal with the artificial stress created by examinations (Jessop, 1991 page 47). In much of the early NCVQ material, because learning was seen as an essentially self-directed activity, reference to teachers and lecturers is restricted to their role as an 'assessor.' Understanding the process of assessment could be reduced to a technical question. The competence of all NVQ and GNVQ assessors could be assured by requiring them

to gain particular the assessor/verifier qualifications that were awarded by the Training and Development Lead Body (TDLB).<sup>32</sup>

## **GNVQ and its critics**

The GNVQ was to be the subject of heavy criticism. The NCVQ 'competence' approach to learning and the 'outcomes' approach towards assessment, was to be the target of more specific concern. The remainder of the chapter focuses on some of GNVQ's critics.

The most ferocious opponent of the NCVQ approach to learning during the early 1990s was Alan Smithers (1993; 1995; 1997). Smithers' concerns about GNVQ and NVQ were to attract considerable media attention as a result of his participation in a television documentary for Channel Four.<sup>33</sup> For Smithers, a major problem with GNVQ was that it had no proper syllabus.

There is no list of what students should learn or teachers teach... because the NCVQ does not believe in defining courses, or timing of content, it is very difficult for teachers to know exactly what the "learning outcomes" are supposed to be, let alone assess them.

(Smithers /Channel Four 1993, p26)

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<sup>32</sup> When becoming a GNVQ centre, schools and colleges were required to give an undertaking that all staff involved in GNVQs would hold TDLB accredited units D32 and D33 for assessors and D34 for 'Internal Verifiers' - the equivalent of centre moderators. In addition, External Verifiers, employed by awarding bodies to monitor assessment decisions made by centres would be expected to be competent to D36 level.

<sup>33</sup> Channel 4's '*All our futures*' winter 1994.

Smithers also attacked the jargon around which the GNVQ was constructed, claiming that it had created a situation where:

Students are given logbooks to encourage them to take responsibility for their own learning but many cannot understand the language in which the logbooks are written.

(Smithers/ Channel Four p32)

According to Smithers, rather than there being real 'standards of competence' there was instead:

An orgy of analysis resulting in highly fragmented, almost incomprehensible, qualifications. What NCVQ failed to do was to distinguish between on the one hand, setting standards and, on the other, designing qualifications to enable those standards to be met.

(Smithers, 1997 p144)

Of particular concern for Smithers was that the GNVQ and NVQ had put 'applied education' at risk. For example, though GNVQ Business had proved to be one of the most popular of the GNVQs with students, it had not been designed to develop the workplace skills that young people had learned on secretarial courses at school or at college. Rather than developing new skills, GNVQ was, he argued part responsible for an emerging skills gap, because it was replacing existing vocational provision.

Smithers offered a traditional critique. As somebody who was in favour of maintaining the distinction between academic education and vocational training (Smithers, 1997), his main concern was that the GNVQ has fallen between two stools. It was neither academic nor was it seriously vocational. However, the approach of NCVQ was also attacked by others more visibly located within the 'moderniser' camp. (Green 1997; Spours 1995; Young 1998; Hodgson and Spours 1999). For example, Green argued that in spite of the existence of mandatory 'core skills' in GNVQ:

Standards of attainment of students on vocational courses in maths and language are still widely held to be too low -well below those achieved on comparable courses in countries like France, Germany and Sweden (Green, 1997a, p89).

Smith's earlier comments about the positive aspects of the GNVQ were also qualified by her concern about specific features of GNVQ. For example, its assessment complexity and the constant need for teachers to deconstruct and demystify a vocabulary which she argued, rather than developing independent learning, could result in students becoming more teacher dependent. Under financial pressures to ensure that students completed their courses, practitioners would, Smith argued, understandably want to ensure that students knew what was required of them.

There is a conflict here between the skills teachers need to develop as facilitators and the pressure on them to justify their role and expertise, to deliver against



qualification targets and act as disciplinarians and agents of social control.  
(Smith, 1998, p.544).

According to Hyland (1994), the NCVQ approach to 'competence' had its foundations in behaviourist psychology - a conservative, rather than a progressive ideology. (Hyland, p.49). Hyland argued that there were clear links between the NCVQ approach to learning and the 'stimulus response' assumptions that underpin behaviourism. For Hyland these are 'utterly inappropriate' for current post-16 learners. The segmented and compartmentalised assessment framework adopted by NCVQ seemed inimical to growth, development and progression in learning (Hyland, p. 62).

Other commentators, for example, Esland, (Avis, *et al*, 1996) have traced the behaviourist emphasis of the NCVQ 'training paradigm' to a neo-classical economics intellectual framework and to the 'scientific management' of the 1920s. Both of which, Esland argues, were significant influences on economic and social policies of the New Right. He argues that these policies were as much about imposing labour discipline and managing unemployment as they were to do with promoting growth, economic prosperity and challenging the effects of globalisation. For Esland and colleagues, the NCVQ philosophy was closer to neo-Fordism rather than post-Fordism. It represented a continuation of a low skills rather than a high skills programme of skill development.

### **Independent learners? The new vocationalism reconsidered.**

For Young (2000), the NCVQ idea that learning can take place 'independently,' of teaching was a mistake. Like Smithers, he criticised the assumption that it was more important to give attention to the assessment and verification of learning outcomes rather than enhancing learning processes and addressing the question of what was learnt. There is a need, Young argued, to 'bring knowledge back in' to the post-16 curriculum, (Hodgson ed. 2000, p108).

Bloomer (1998), has criticised the 'illusion of progressivism in GNVQ.' He argued that the 'freedom,' the 'learner control' and the autonomy that were supposed to be a feature of the GNVQ experience were in reality no more than an exercise in information gathering within a highly restricted and prescribed course of learning. This created learner-teacher relationships where according to one student from his sample, 'they give you a task sheet which tells you what the assignment is about and what you need to do' (Bloomer, 1998, p.179).

The argument that the new vocationalism of the 1980s represented a progressive pedagogy has been challenged by a number of writers. Avis (1991) for example, argues that if the aim of liberal and general studies in the 1960s was to move students beyond narrow vocational concerns, then the new vocationalism of the 1970s and 1980s must be seen as a retraction of this. According to Avis, the incorporation of a progressive pedagogy within CPVE courses was extremely selective. Even if CPVE did officially seek to promote a range of social and life skills, he argues that these exercises only involved students being asked to demonstrate an ability to perform a number of low level tasks effectively. It did not encourage them to develop any real

intellectual critical capacity. He argues that if courses like the CPVE were built around progressive teaching techniques, they remained part of a conservative education, primarily designed to reproduce the type of narrow subjectivity and orientation required by capitalist industry.

His comments about CPVE can be applied to other aspects of new vocationalism. The vocational learning style was, he argued, aimed at developing an atomised individual rather than encouraging any real understanding about the collective nature of work. In other words, progressive classroom techniques did not constitute a radical alternative. Avis argues that the importance given to profiling and to 'negotiated' learning was a mechanism of social control, a way of monitoring student subjectivity to help in the construction of a flexible, reliable, responsible and self disciplined worker and essential for the continuation of Fordist/neo-Fordist work practices.

### **New skills or new labour discipline?**

As the previous chapter argued, the expansion of GNVQ was, part of a more general policy of establishing new forms of division from post-14 to higher education. For Cohen, the aim of vocationalist courses is as much about the need to create new forms of social discipline as it was to promote new skills (Cohen, 1994, p105). According to *Socialist Teacher* (1994), a magazine produced by left wing activists in the National Union of Teachers, 'vocationalism' has become associated with the accommodation of educational failure rather than promoting new work skills or

educational success. Rather than modernising the comprehensive school curriculum, its aim was to re- create a secondary modern stream.

If the arguments of Bloomer about the 'commodified' nature of GNVQ also strengthen the arguments in chapters 1 and 2 about the credentialisation and the certification of learning, then these are further exemplified both in the mandatory end of unit multi-choice tests and in the attitudes of students in the *Inner London* sample in chapter 4, towards the 'grading' of their assignments. As students had limited opportunities to take or to re-take the tests (from September 1999, these were reduced to just two sittings, in January and June), the pressure on the school to provide extra coaching for students, or to 'teach to tests' became considerable. At *Inner London* school there were situations where some GNVQ students might be sitting tests before they had completed assignments in the units. The tests were only meant to 'confirm' students' performance. (One ICT teacher in *Inner London* entered his students for all tests at the first opportunity. He proudly announced that there were some units that could be passed without the need for covering the requirements in an assignment).

At *Inner London*, students underwent endless revision sessions with their teachers at the end of their courses, trying to clear a backlog of tests that had been failed on previous occasions. In these situations there was little evidence of 'learning by doing' rather a desperate need to pass the tests so as to be able to move on and complete the course, although as the chapter which deals with the student case studies will show, some student were able to gain admission to universities without passing the tests (some on condition that they would!). The NCVQ guidelines on grading

themes also led to a situation at *Inner London* where students worked either from templates, from checklists provided by assessors or relied on material from commercial publishers on 'how to improve your grade.' Thus, rather than reflecting student creativity, the skills of 'planning and monitoring,' 'information handling' and 'evaluation' had become largely technical and instrumental challenges, where students under pressure to keep up with other assignments would be able to 'upgrade' their work several months after they have first completed it in time for verifier visits. At *Inner London* the most visible examples of this were where students went back to complete action plans for working on assignments, several weeks after they had completed them.

For Smith (1999), it was questionable if GNVQ assessment developed any transferable skills. In particular, she argues that students gained little from the NCVQ promoted competencies of action planning and evaluation. In her survey most students did not believe that the process of systematically writing an action plan helped them to develop better planning skills. According to one student 'if you are going to do it, why should you have to write it down?' (Smith, p.546). Students also had difficulty in linking the written evaluation carried out at the end of each assignment with the 'real life' (Smith, p.547) evaluation that they were constantly being required to carry out. As Smith acknowledges, the fact that students were able to work out strategies to jump through the necessary hoops in order to meet a series of bureaucratic requirements was hardly an endorsement of the NCVQ philosophy of learning - espoused in chapter I.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has sought to place some of the general arguments put forward in section one into a policy context. It has argued that at best, the relationship between GNVQ pedagogy and perceived changes in the world of work was a problematic one. In relation to the arguments in section one, the chapter that follows examines the history of GNVQ as an educational credential. It argues that if GNVQ was originally created to 'cool out' a new generation of learners, then the changes that were made to the qualifications in the closing months of the twentieth century, were a further consequence of GNVQ continuing to be used by young people as an alternative qualification. One that enabled them to stay in the education system and move from school to higher education.

## **Chapter Four**

### **From GNVQ to VCE**

GNVQ external tests serve a very different function from academic examinations.

(Gilbert Jessop, 1995, p 46)

If you are familiar with GCE A-level and GCSE assessment then you should feel comfortable with the new regime.

(FEDA, *Update* July 2000)

The conflicting nature of these statements, illustrates the extent to which the style of GNVQ was to change as a result of various reports and reviews of post-16 qualifications that took place during the second half of the 1990s. This chapter will examine the ‘academic drift’ of GNVQ. It will argue that this was the result of GNVQ being used as an educational credential rather than as a ‘vocational’ learning by an increasingly large number of young people who, as a result of the changes in employment opportunities described in the previous chapter were remaining in full-time education beyond the age of sixteen.

One consequence of this was that the GNVQ was serving as an entrance qualification for higher education. Another was that GNVQ was to become part of *Curriculum 2000*, a new post-16 qualifications framework introduced by the new Labour government in September 2000 and designed to broaden opportunities at post-16. In *Curriculum 2000*, Advanced GNVQ was not only redesigned, but also given a new name. From September 2000 Advanced GNVQ was re-launched as the Vocational Certificate of Education (VCE) - a 'vocational A-level'. Rather than reflecting the new style of vocational learning pioneered by the NCVQ, the design of VCE now increasingly mirrored that of academic qualifications.

This chapter will argue that even though there may have been serious problems with the design implementation of the original GNVQ, the main reason for these changes was the desire to improve the status and the 'rigour' of vocational qualifications in a post-16 education system still dominated by A-levels. In the context of Collins arguments about the inferior position of vocational qualifications, the chapter will examine whether attempts to improve their status were likely to be successful.

### **GNVQ; a problem of design?**

Chapter 1 examined some of the criticisms of GNVQ, not only from those hostile to its introduction in general, but also by those who, while in favour of modernising the post-16 curriculum were critical of the way in which GNVQ had been designed. For Spours, the GNVQ remained 'a hybrid, a contradiction and a paradox' (Spours 1997,



p 60). Though it recruited strongly during its first two years, he argued that student completion rates continued to be low. For example, after the qualification had been running for two years at Advanced level and even after making allowances for those who took an extra term to complete portfolios, Spours claimed that barely 50% of students were completing their courses (Spours, 1995, p12).

Spours argued that this was the primary reason for the NCVQ introducing a number of changes that were to take effect from September 1995.<sup>34</sup> These were designed to make the qualification more manageable. However, more significantly, the NCVQ commissioned Dr John Capey to undertake a major review of GNVQ. His findings were published by NCVQ in November 1995. If the changes made in 1995 were essentially short-term or fire-fighting measures to enable GNVQ to keep running, then Capey's proposals were to trigger a more general change for the future direction of the qualification.

The changes to the qualification represented a significant departure from the traditional NCVQ 'competence' model and which as chapter 3 described, was seen as a new type of learning. The characteristics of the new qualification increasingly resembled those of the academic qualifications of which the NCVQ had been so critical. The main changes are outlined below.

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<sup>34</sup> The first round of changes were referred to in chapter 3. They included an emphasis on students meeting the requirements of 'evidence indicators' rather than all of the GNVQ range statements. External Verifiers were also encouraged to assess the quality of outcomes. According to Sharp (1998) these changes were significant enough to create a Mark 11 version representing a 'considerable retreat' from the Jessop version. The post-Capey GNVQ, discussed in this chapter constituted Mark 111.

### **Three-six-twelve.**

It was proposed that the new VCE would still be available in a twelve-unit form and that it would continue to represent the equivalent of two A-levels. However there would in addition now be a six unit 'single' qualification which would represent the equivalent of one A-level. As was the case with the new A-levels, students who only wished to complete the first three units of the VCE, would also be able to gain an Advanced Subsidiary (AS) qualification. As was also the case with GCE A-levels, students' written work would be graded on a scale of A-E rather than on the old Pass, Merit or Distinction basis. Students not reaching grade E would fail. Rather than students having to demonstrate that they had developed a number of 'process' skills which, as the earlier chapter observed sat (uneasily) alongside a 'quality' grade, each GNVQ unit would now be accompanied by an assessment grid outlining clearly what would be expected of a student if they wanted to reach a particular grade in that specific unit. Examples of these are given in the appendices at the end of the thesis. In terms of the earlier discussion about changes in learning styles these developments are significant because, rather than existing academic learning taking on the characteristics of GNVQ as Jessop had argued, the opposite was happening.

The new VCE increasingly resembled the A-level in other respects. As is now the case with academic qualifications like the GCE A-level and the GCSE, assessment was to be 'criterion referenced.' Instead of being required to verify that candidates had met the NCVQ performance criteria and evidence indicators, teachers would now be given direct advice about how marks were to be allocated and on the kinds of answers that would be expected for each particular grade. This would also be the case

with the Intermediate and Foundation level GNVQ although here, for the time being, the pass/merit/distinction grades were to remain.<sup>35</sup>

There would no longer be references to ‘performance criteria’ or mention of any ‘evidence indicators’ and VCE units would now not be divided into ‘elements.’ A student’s final mark would represent the total of the scores in each unit and the grade a student was to be awarded, would be calculated as the average of these. Thus, unlike the old system where a candidate had to meet all performance criteria, a student who scored poorly in one area, but highly in another, could be awarded the same grade as a candidate who demonstrates a general standard of proficiency across all units<sup>1</sup>. However, unlike in the GNVQ where students could continue to re take the multi choice paper until they were successful, in the new externally assessed units students were only allowed one re-sit.

### **External assessment**

Within the new version of the qualification, not only was the amount of external assessment to be significantly increased, but also its style was to be significantly altered. Rather than continuing to use ‘pass/fail’ multi-choice tests to confirm portfolio evidence; instead approximately one third of all units would now be externally assessed. (In other words, two out of six units at Intermediate level would be externally assessed and four out of the twelve units at Advanced level).

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<sup>35</sup> From September 2002 it was proposed that all Intermediate/Foundation (and the Part One GNVQ qualification operational in Key Stage 4) would be re launched as the ‘vocational’ GCSE (VCSE).

In future, even though it would still be referred to as a 'test', in reality the external assessment would now take the form of a formal examination. For example, as with academic exams, students would be required to produce written answers carrying varying degrees of marks, rather than, as they had done in the previous multi-choice papers, tick boxes to identify the correct answer.

For particular units, and in line with practice in many GCSE/A-level courses, students would receive a pre-released case study, which they would be required to study so as to answer written questions. In addition to the externally assessed units and following the practice with course work in GCSE and A-levels, all internally assessed work was now to be 'moderated' rather than 'verified.' The actual practicalities of moderation would vary from awarding body to awarding body. In some cases, as had been the case with the process of 'external verification' in the old GNVQs, moderators would still carry out annual visits to centres. In others, in line with the practice for many GCE and GCSEs, there would be standardisation meetings for a cluster of centres and postal sampling by examination boards.

### **Reducing workload**

Returning to Spours comments about workload pressures, it is certainly true, that a number of Capey's recommendations could be seen as being a direct response to problems faced by teachers and lecturers in delivering the GNVQ. Looking at evidence produced by the further education colleges lecturers' union NATFHE (1995) for example, as well as at the policy statements produced by the National

evidence produced by the further education colleges lecturers' union NATFHE (1995) for example, as well as at the policy statements produced by the National Union of Teachers, it is clear that there had been widespread concern about the workload implications of GNVQ. Arguably, instead of 'demystifying' assessment, in the way that the creators of the GNVQ perceived (Jessup, 1991, p59), GNVQ assessment had instead become a bureaucratic nightmare for both staff and students. According to a NATFHE survey for example, 60% of respondents expressed concerns about paperwork increasing, class sizes growing, lack of time for curriculum development and not enough administrative support (NATFHE 1995 p7). For Capey 1995, p22), the evidence presented to the review group was unequivocal in identifying the need for further simplification of assessment and recording requirements.

Although, the 1995 changes reflected a move away from the requirement to cover everything listed in the 'range' and only required students to cover the evidence indicators, figures from awarding bodies continued to show relatively high rates of non-completion by GNVQ students.

**% of students who completed their courses that summer**

	<b>Intermediate</b>	<b>Advanced</b>
<b>1997</b>	46%	45.8%
<b>1998</b>	50%	49%

Source: Joint Awarding Bodies Annual Report 1999

For Spours, a major reason for the low completion rates had been the inability of many students to cope with the demands required to complete their portfolios. According to FEDA (1998), 'excessive workload' and 'the number and scheduling of the assignments' were both cited by practitioners as major reasons for this (FEDA, 1998, p 57-62).

According to Spours, Capey's proposals would be an important if limited step forwards in the reform of the qualification. An upbeat FEDA mailing to schools and colleges in the summer of 2000 also proclaimed that:

The good news is that the revised GNVQ really is easier to assess...Teachers feel liberated from the 'grading themes,' the need for complex recording systems and the emphasis on 'evidence gathering.' (FEDA *Update* July, 2000)

In their report from the schools and colleges involved in the piloting of the new six units GNVQ, FEDA also observed that:

Most centres found that the new assessment grids made it easier for students and teachers to understand what is required at each grade.

(FEDA *Update* July, 2000)

However, if the Capey proposals were to make the GNVQ more manageable for practitioners then other data collected by FEDA about students' reasons for not completing their courses suggested that only a small minority thought that 'the

course was too difficult' (FEDA, 1998, p23). Though a significant number continued to give motives connected with the course as being their primary reasons for non-completion, these cannot necessarily be interpreted as being specifically related to the inadequacies in the GNVQ design. As the FEDA research below shows, students often left their studies for a variety of reasons, many having little to do with the nature of a GNVQ course or issues associated with it.

Main reason for withdrawal from Advanced courses (FEDA 1998)	
The course was not the right one for me	36%
The course was boring	32%
I got a job	25%
I was dissatisfied with the quality of teaching	26%
My personal/family circumstances changed	17%

The evidence from OFSTED was also inconclusive. For example, while they reported that their 1996 inspection of GNVQ highlighted a number of improvements which needed to be sustained and they identified a number of weaknesses, they also declared that:

Students responded well to GNVQs. They displayed positive attitudes and behaviour, extended attention spans, adaptability and self-reliance. (OFSTED 1997, p4/5)

It is therefore not sufficient to explain the changes made to GNVQ as the result of student and teacher dissatisfaction with workload, or because of the poor design of the original version of the GNVQ. The remainder of this chapter argues that the changes reflected wider pressures, in particular, the way in which many students, who were not able to use the traditional academic route and continued to use GNVQ to stay in the education system and attempted to enter higher education. It argues that the concerns about inconsistency of standards as a result of the assessment procedures in GNVQ, were a reflection of this and that in an effort to improve its standing as an educational credential, GNVQ experienced a process of 'academic drift'.

### **GNVQ and higher education**

It is true that in the 1991 White Paper, which announced its introduction<sup>36</sup>, one function of GNVQ was to provide 'an accepted route to higher education.' Arguably however, this had never been the primary objective of a qualification, which as noted earlier was designed to serve as a 'general' NVQ, or as Hyland argues, to compensate for the narrowness of NVQ and to 'offer a broad preparation for employment' (Hyland, 1994, p104).

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<sup>36</sup> *Education and Training in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* published jointly by the DES and the Department for Employment.



While still falling short of government targets, participation in higher education continued to grow significantly and by 2001, applications for university were at their highest ever. These increases and the consequences for graduate recruitment, are examined in more detail later, but they should be seen as a further endorsement of the argument about the growth of the credential society.

Even though a significant number of students had previously progressed to university via BTEC National courses (Sharp, 1998), it was clear that as early as 1997, Advanced GNVQs were increasingly being promoted as the alternative route into higher education.<sup>37</sup> According to UCAS even by 1997, candidates holding GNVQs already made up 7.5% of applicants. (Up from 2.5%, in 1995).

GNVQs represented an alternative because, according to a FEDA/Institute of Education survey published in 1997, students tended to start Advanced GNVQs with between three or four grade C, GCSE grades, or less if they had progressed via Intermediate GNVQ<sup>38</sup>. These grades would not generally have been considered high enough for students to be admitted to A-level courses. According to the survey, students starting A-levels had significantly higher GCSE grades and had not usually considered GNVQ. In 1996 21,308 Advanced GNVQ students had made applications to higher education (69% of those who actually completed to award). Of these applicants, 61.4% were successful (FEDA/IoE p95). In a FEDA/Institute of Education sample of 250 students of these students 0.5 % gained places at Russell

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<sup>37</sup> The Guardian (14/07/98) carried a recruitment advertisement from North London University with the headline 'from GNVQ to degree in one step' aimed at students due to finish Advanced GNVQ courses that summer.

<sup>38</sup> According to the FEDA/Institute survey, in 1994, 64% of those entering Intermediate GNVQ after year 11 had one or less grade C at GCSE. 46% of Intermediate GNVQ students planned to progress to Advanced level.

Group universities and a further 20% at pre 1992 universities. The remainder entered post-1992 universities or went to Colleges of Higher Education. According to UCAS (1998) for example, 23.7% of 1997 applicants to business and administrative studies courses were made by GNVQ students. GNVQ students made up 7.9% of all applicants. According to the FEDA/Institute of Education researchers, most of the GNVQ students wanted to follow a course that was broadly in line with their GNVQ area. The UCAS data also showed for example, that more than one third of GNVQ applicants applied for business studies courses. Yet according to league tables, in terms of both their reputation and their ability to secure high-level employment for their students, the traditional universities still dominate (*The Guardian* 9/11/99). Business students now made up the largest cohort of the total university population, (*The Guardian* 28/8/99). Of particular significance was the fact that in 1999 GNVQ students also made up the largest group of those entering business HND courses. In his review of post-16 qualifications, Dearing (1996) considered that universities had too little experience of the GNVQ and that as a result the GNVQ needed to change. In particular, the consistency and rigour of vocational education needed to improve.

GNVQ awards system should be more finely tuned than pass, merit and distinction. There was also some comment that the GNVQ forms of assessment might not fully prepare students for tasks in higher education such as note-taking and extended essay writing (Dearing 1996, p10).

Despite his concern about the workload issues of GNVQ, Capey was also anxious about standards. In particular, ambiguity and inconsistency were to be found in the unit tests, grading and verification processes of the GNVQ. The following section examines some of these concerns.

### **Unit Tests**

To achieve credible parity in relation to A and AS levels there should be a requirement that the written tests in general NVQs should form a very significant part of the final assessment and that this part should be centrally set and administered (NCVQ 1992, quoted in Hyland 1994, p108).

For Hyland, the external testing requirements in the GNVQ, and in particular the fact that the pass requirements had been set at a high level and were one of the ways in which GNVQs are being sold to higher education. He argued that GNVQ signalled a clear departure from the NVQ competence model and suggested that 'the vocational wheel has turned a full circle' (Hyland, 1994, p.107). However in sharp contrast, Spours claimed that the multi choice end of unit tests, which were a mandatory feature of the GNVQ were a clear example of the hybrid formation of the qualification. As well as being marked on a simple pass or fail basis, the tests did not, he argued, utilise the types of skills that are valued by universities. For example, essay writing and conceptual development. As a result they had, he argued cut little ice with HE tutors. (Spours, 1995). A number of NCVQ statements also implied that

the tests should never be regarded as definitive statements about student abilities.

Thus according to Jessop:

Because of the public visibility of external tests, there is a danger that these will be interpreted as the standard required for GNVQ and compared with A-level or GCSE examinations. This would be a mistake.... the most substantial work will be found in a student's portfolio of evidence (Jessop, 1995, p46.)

For Capey there continued to be problems with the variability between different tests, particularly because of differing past rates across subjects and levels.<sup>39</sup> While he suggested that in some areas the tests might have been too easy, with others, schools and colleges had had to spend large amounts of time 'coaching' their students through tests set for particular units. He suggested that difficulties had also arisen with the level of mathematical content 'and reflected the low level of mathematical achievement on entry.' This was a major problem and one which, he argued, could not be solved by making the tests easier (Capey, 1995, p17).

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<sup>39</sup> In the Advanced Business GNVQ for example, there were significant differences in the performances of the *Inner London* student sample, with several needing more than one attempt to pass *Business in the Economy* and the two financial units, but all passing the human resources test well before they had finished assignment work for this unit.

## Grading

It has already been noted that compared with the marking of academic work Jessop considered the grading system in GNVQs to play a fundamentally different role. Whereas in the latter, grading existed to select and to differentiate students, in the GNVQ grading was designed to confirm a particular level of competence reached by a student. Another way of expressing this would be to say that within GCE A-levels it was only possible for a minority of students to achieve grade A, but within GNVQ there would be nothing to prevent all candidates from reaching Distinction level. However, despite Jessop's justification of the assessment process it was the grading criteria which caused the most concern. According to Capey, not only were responses from centres 'overwhelmingly negative' about the effectiveness of grading criteria but:

Evaluation reports from NCVQ consistently reveal there is insufficient understanding of grading procedures. ...Staff has found them hard to understand. (Capey, 1995, p16).

Despite attempts made by NCVQ to simplify grading procedures, a number of examples can be used to illustrate some of the concerns of schools and colleges. Differences between one level of grading and another were often confusing. Sometimes they were reduced to ways in which wording was used. For example to secure a Merit in the Evaluation theme, a student had to:

Judge outcomes against original criteria for success; identify alternative criteria that can be applied in order to judge success of the activities (NCVQ 1995).

Whereas to reach distinction level a student had to:

Judge outcomes approach original criteria for success and identify a *range* of alternative criteria in order to judge success of the activities.

At Merit level for 'quality of outcomes' assessors would be asked to confirm that:

Student's work demonstrates an effective synthesis of knowledge, skills and understanding in response to *discrete* tasks.

At Distinction assessors were told to ensure that:

Student's work demonstrates an effective synthesis of knowledge skills and understanding in response to *complex* activities.

Elsewhere, the difference between a Distinction and Merit was dependent on the extent to which a student 'independently' carried out particular activities. It was also the case that because assessors only had to make a grading decision on one third of the evidence, it was not always possible to identify comparative performance levels in particular units (Capey, 1995, p15).

### **From verification to moderation**

External verifiers were responsible for monitoring the internal verification process, and for checking the assessment decisions of teachers and lecturers. But, as Capey

acknowledged, there were concerns that external verifiers had become pre-occupied with examining centre documentation and procedures, rather than with the sampling of students' work. These doubts were to be intensified by the fact that as a result of financial constraints, external verifiers were sometimes only able to make two centre visits per year. According to NCVQ itself, there was concern that External Verifiers did not have a common approach to portfolio sampling (GNVQ *Update*,03/97). There was also concern that the pressures on schools and colleges to 'get results' (Advanced GNVQ performance levels were included in post-16 league tables) and to place as many students in universities as possible was resulting in further inconsistencies in grading decisions, and that it had been difficult to determine the authenticity of the improvements in the number of students reaching Merit and Distinction level particularly at Advanced level. Certainly, as the figures below show, during the years that GNVQ entries continued to grow, achievement rates were impressive.

1996	PASS	9367	MERIT	14120	DISTINCTION	743
1997	PASS	10937	MERIT	17013	DISTINCTION	9047
1998	PASS	11903	MERIT	19286	DISTINCTION	10157
(Source Joint Council Reports for 1996, 1997, 1998)						

These patterns were to continue. In 2001 for example, according to the Joint Council report, GNVQ Advanced students recorded rates of 15. 8% pass, 27.0 % merit and

17.0 % distinction. By comparison, for GCE A-level that same year, the following grade ranges were awarded, 18.6% A, 19.3% B, 21.4% C, 18.1% D, 12.4% E. Considering that those students starting Advanced GNVQ generally did so with a lower average spread of GCSE grades than those beginning GCE A-levels, for university admissions officers in particular, this raised significant issues about the quality of assessment in the GNVQ. Under the new system, moderators were to focus exclusively on moderating assessments. Their work would differ significantly from that of external verifiers, whose role also incorporated advice guidance, quality assurance and standardisation (FEDA *Update* Oct 2000). At *Inner London* School, the students told stories (sometimes bringing examples) of friends and relatives at local colleges who were achieving higher grades even though they were producing much less work. Even though one needs to be careful in making generalisations based on experiences of one group of students, according to an OFSTED inspection report (1997), based on a sample inspection of 40 schools only:

Four-fifths of the Advanced level portfolios which had been graded at distinction were judged to be of a standard broadly comparable with what can be expected of GCE A-level candidates achieving grades A or B. Three quarters of merit portfolios were comparable with A-level grade C.

In 1998, OFSTED were to report that one in five awards given to sixth formers did not reach the required standards and that from a sample of 100 Advanced portfolios that had been given merit or distinction level, a sixth had been marked too generously. According to the TES (March 6<sup>th</sup> 1998), in another survey inspectors also found significant inadequacies in assessment and grading in one in three schools.



### University offers to GNVQ students

There is some evidence that when higher education institutions made offers to GNVQ students, they asked for grades that were the official equivalents to GCE A-level grades. A Distinction level pass at Advanced level GNVQ was considered to represent the equivalent of two A-level grade A or B passes, while a Merit was considered to equate with a C level pass. For example, Middlesex University, the most popular with the *Inner London* students in the case study, asked GNVQ applicants for a Merit and A-level applicants for two C grades for their Business degrees. Westminster, also popular, but seen by the students as a difficult university to get into, required a Distinction or two B's. While in East Anglia, Anglia Polytechnic would ask the Health and Social Care students at *Anglia School* for a Merit and A-level applicants for two Cs.

However, I remember an off the record discussion with a post-1992 university representative at a sixth form careers convention at Wembley Stadium in the spring of 1999. The representative complained about the low standard of many of the students they admitted with GNVQ and was in no doubt that it was an easier route into higher education. These views should not be seen as representative of HE as a whole, however, if the proportion of students gaining higher than a pass grade continued to rise much faster than the increases in those students gaining grade C or above at A-level, it may well have been the case that universities would no longer consider these GNVQ grades as being of equal value.

## **GNVQ, VCE and *Curriculum 2000*.**

An equally significant factor behind the 'academic drift' of the GNVQ/VCE was the position it occupied within *Curriculum 2000* the post-16 curriculum framework introduced in September 2000. Ending the division between academic and vocational education has been a long standing aim of many educational reformers (NUT 1996, Crombie-White *et al* 1995, Benn and Chitty, 1996, Pring, 1995). However the pressure has generally come from educationalists promoting social equality and equal opportunities. More recently however, challenging the academic – vocational divide has been central to arguments about the need for modernising education.

The curriculum policy document *A British Baccalaureate* produced in 1990 by the centre-left think tank, the Institute of Public Policy Research has been described as the most comprehensive critique of post-compulsory education in England and Wales.<sup>40</sup> The authors of the *British Baccalaureate* argued that the differences in status which continued to exist between academic education and vocational training, reflected the fact that the education system itself had remained historically divided. Like Brown and Lauder, they argued that this also reflected the influence of the historic divisions within the labour market. But for the authors of the IPPR report, the academic - vocational divide had become more intensified as a result of lack of government intervention in the youth labour market and because of the failure to confront the short term attractiveness to both employers and young people of leaving

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<sup>40</sup> See Young (1998) p65. Jones and Hatcher (1994) describe both the IPPR proposals and Brown and Lauder's article as being 'notable for their efforts to ground a set of educational proposals in the 'real' developments of advanced capitalist economies' (p247).

school at the earliest opportunity.

Previous attempts to diversify and modernise the academic track had failed or been rejected by governments because, the IPPR authors argued, A-levels could not be reformed or modified. A major problem with A-levels was that they were made up of individual subjects clearly separated from each other, each with their own traditions. Not only had the academic pathway always been narrow, but the IPPR authors argued it was designed to fit a situation where only a small proportion of young people would stay on in full-time education post-16. There had been a number of attempts to reform individual A-levels, by introducing course work based assessment and also by increasing in the number of syllabuses available, yet major changes had always been rejected. This was demonstrated only too well by the rejection of the Higginson Report by the Conservative Government in 1988.<sup>41</sup>

The IPPR proposed a new certificate for post-16 students, not only bridging the traditional academic and vocational divisions, but also science and arts subjects. The IPPR proposed that at Advanced level the new diploma would replace existing academic and vocational qualifications. It would also be available at Foundation level for less able students. To gain the diploma, students would complete core, specialist and work/community-based modules. At the heart of the diploma system would be a new modular structure, organised in three domains of study, social and human science, natural science and technology and arts, languages and literature. Within each domain there would be core modules, specialist modules and work/community-based modules. Students would have the freedom to choose a range of modules

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<sup>41</sup> For an excellent overview of A-level developments and attempts at reform, see *Learning for the Future Working Paper 2* Young and Leney, Inst of Ed 1995, and Young 1998, chapter 9.

within and between domains 'but would be encouraged to negotiate a coherent programme including a combination of more applied, practical and theoretical elements' (IPPR p28). They would be supported in this by career advisers and councillors.

The importance of changing the way that the curriculum is organised at an institutional level, so as to reflect the economic realities of the twenty first century was to be restated by Michael Young (1998). According to Young, one of the original authors of *A British Baccalaureate*, 'divisive specialisation' - where the curriculum is divided into clear academic subjects and where academic education is separated from vocational training, was a product of the age of 'mass production.' A reflection of an economy based on the clear separation of mental and manual labour (Young, 1998, p 66). In sharp contrast, Young argued that the flexible specialisation of the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy now required, a 'connective specialisation' (Young, 1998, p 77).

But compared with the IPPR baccalaureate model, the *Curriculum 2000* proposals were to be very modest. They did not seek to abolish the academic-vocational divide by replacing existing qualifications with a new diploma. On the contrary they had their origins in Sir Ron Dearing's 1996 review of post- 16 qualifications. Rather than abolish vocational and academic divisions, Dearing's approach was to try and secure parity between them by using the concept of 'pathways.' However according to Spours and Hodgson (1997), despite their conservative nature, Dearing's proposals represented the beginning of what has been termed a 'framework' approach. One of the main justifications for the design of the

VCE was to facilitate the mixing of general and vocational qualifications under *Curriculum 2000* (Savory, Hodgson and Spours 2003). The remainder of the chapter examines the extent to which vocational–academic parity was able to be achieved as a result of the introduction of *Curriculum 2000*.

### **Dearing and beyond**

Dearing's main proposals were that Advanced level students should follow either an academic (GCE-A level) a vocational, (GNVQ) or a work-based (NVQ) 'pathway'. He proposed that eventually an 'overarching' National Diploma be introduced that would link parallel qualifications on the three routes and which would also include certification for 'core skills' (soon to be renamed key skills) in Communication, Number and IT. Dearing recognised that students may want to combine courses from different pathways but while he considered that GNVQ needed to become more academically rigorous and that the amount of external assessment should be increased, he considered that each pathway would offer a specific type of knowledge. In fact, Dearing was in no doubt about the fact that 'GNVQ should retain its present purposes, distinctive characteristics and size' (Dearing, 1996, 9.1).

*Aiming Higher* (1996), a pre-election policy statement by New Labour, went much further than Dearing. In addition to the proposals for three, six and twelve unit GNVQs, it called for the modularisation of A-levels, opening the way to a situation where 'separate tracks would eventually disappear' (*Aiming Higher* p12). It also proposed an Advanced Diploma at level 3 in which a Core Skills Unit would play

integral part. For Spours and Young (1996) *Aiming Higher* could be seen as the beginning of a longer term strategy for radical change, which would realise the baccalaureate objectives.

The policy statement *Qualifying for Success*, a consultation document published soon after Labour's election victory, included proposals for dividing A-levels into three unit AS and a further three unit A2. But it represented a narrowing of objectives and proposals for an overarching/ diploma award remained on the back-burner, to be addressed if Labour won a second term. This document became the forerunner to *Curriculum 2000* (see appendix 3), which began in September 2000. For Young (1997), one of the authors of the IPPR document, despite the limited nature of *Curriculum 2000* its 'framework'<sup>42</sup> approach still had the potential to evolve into something else. While separate qualifications continued to exist, the new GCE A-level and VCE would enable greater flexibility to mix different types of learning and learners with different needs would be able to reach Advanced-level by different routes.

### **Separate but equal?**

In the context of Collins' arguments about the inferior position of vocational qualifications in a credential society and the arguments in chapter 2 about the new need to divide post-16 learners, the remainder of this chapter will argue that, despite its reinvention as a VCE, the GNVQ has not been able to achieve parity of status with GCE A-level. In particular, it will examine whether schools and colleges did attempt

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<sup>42</sup> The linkages between academic, vocation and work based qualifications is shown in appendix 3.

to promote academic and vocational mixing and the extent to which the new 6 unit Vocational A-level played a role in enabling this. In attempting to build up a national picture about how *Curriculum 2000* was introduced and to assess the continued significance of academic and vocational divides, it has used data collected by the DfEE, UCAS and the Institute of Education /Nuffield project (see the Preface section on Methodology). It also examines the initial responses of universities to *Curriculum 2000* and the VCE.

#### **DfEE and UCAS surveys 2000. How much academic and vocational mixing?**

The DfEE's survey of school and college preparations for *Curriculum 2000* was conducted when schools and colleges were finalising their proposals. At a general level, the DfEE data appeared to show potentially strong support for broadening the range of subjects in school sixth forms, sixth form colleges and further education colleges, even if the enthusiasm of schools in the independent sector was less evident (Spours, Savory and Hodgson, 2000, p31-32). A similar picture emerged from UCAS which suggested that over 80% of students, would be taking at least four subjects during the first year.

However, the DfEE survey also asked institutions if they thought that students *should* be encouraged to study both academic and vocational subjects. Only 9% of the sample could be said to 'strongly agree,' 31% disagreed and 10% 'strongly disagreed.' The level of opposition appeared much greater in school sixth forms than in FE colleges (Spours, Savory and Hodgson, 2000, p31) and was much more

pronounced in the independent sector where only 8% agreed. The opposition from the independent sector and the difference between school sixth forms and colleges is significant and reflects the historical traditions of these institutions outlined in chapter 2. In particular, the fact that FE colleges have in the past primarily concentrated on vocational training while sixth forms have concentrated on A-levels.

Unlike the DfEE, UCAS also collected data about the particular responses of institutions towards the new 3-unit and 6-unit GNVQ/VCE. The data below was drawn from a sample of over 3500 schools and colleges during the second term the reforms. 36.3% said they would be prepared to introduce the new 3-unit qualification, 56.8. % the 6-unit and 53.4% the 12 -Unit. Those saying they would not, represented 39.5%, 30.7% and 32.8% respectively, (the others did not reply to this question). However, it is the differences in attitude between different types of schools towards the new qualifications that were particularly significant. These are shown below.

*Will you be offering, 3 Unit, 6 Unit, 12 Unit awards?* (UCAS, 2001, p26)

School/College Type	Response Yes or No	3 Units	6 Units	12 Units
Colleges	Yes	162 (58.5)	231(83.4%)	242 (87.4%)
Colleges	No	48 (17.3%)	17 (6.1%)	15 (5.4%)
Comprehensives	Yes	522 (44.0%)	845(71.3%)	775 (65.4%)
Comprehensives	No	356 (30%)	220 (18.5%	261 (22.0%)
Grammars	Yes	10 (10.8%)	12 (12.9%)	8 (8.6%)
Grammars	No	65 (69.8%)	63 (36.7%)	65 (69.8%)
Independents	Yes	25 (6.0%)	35 (8.3%)	32 (7.6%)
Independents	No	313 (73.4%)	308(73.4%)	308 (73.4%)



The returns show clear divisions between, on the one hand, independent and grammar schools that remained hostile to the new vocational A-levels and colleges and comprehensives that responded to them more positively. When asked if they intended to combine GCE Advanced and/or Advanced Subsidiary with one of the new GNVQ (VCE) awards, answers appeared to be very encouraging for reformers.

School/College Type	Yes	No	No response
<b>Colleges</b>	239 (86.3%)	20 (7.2%)	18 (6.5%)
<b>Comprehensives</b>	953 (80.3%)	192 (16.2%)	41 (3.5%)
<b>Grammars</b>	19 (20.4%)	64 (68.8%)	10 (10.8%)
<b>Independents</b>	42 (10.0%)	326 (77.6%)	52 (12.4%)

However UCAS suggested that this response should be ‘viewed with some caution’ (UCAS 2000 p44). They pointed out that the large number of respondents who did intend to integrate the vocational and the academic appears surprising in view of the relatively low take up of 3-unit and 6-unit qualifications.

#### **Institute of Education/Nuffield case studies**

In addition to analysing the UCAS/DfEE data, Savoy, Hodgson and Spours (2001) carried out a more in depth study of 50 schools and colleges. Their preliminary findings were based on site visits both before and after the initiation of the reforms. These case studies provided a more in depth picture of institutional differences. The

data that was generated, if less extensive than that from UCAS and the DfEE, provided a different perspective on the pattern of *Curriculum 2000* provision.

The authors' data shows that in the further education colleges, 20% of *Curriculum 2000* students were taking Advanced VCEs – mostly through the 12-unit programme, but only 12 % were mixing general and vocational study. In the sixth form colleges, the figures were 18% and 8% respectively. The most significant amount of mixing and matching took place in what the authors grouped together as 'lower attaining' comprehensives. These had predominantly small sixth forms, where 52% were taking VCEs and 45% were mixing general and vocational learning. However, as the comments from staff make clear, these schools tended to have established GNVQ courses before *Curriculum 2000* and in fact, may have used the GNVQ as part of a recruitment strategy for increasing the size of their sixth form and so qualify for additional funding referred to in chapter 2. After the FE colleges (40%), this category of schools also had the lowest percentage of students taking four AS levels in year one (only 63% compared with 73% in Sixth Form colleges). By way of a contrast, in the 'selective and independent schools' category, there were no students taking VCEs. As the report authors observe:

Their response to *Curriculum 2000* could be seen as simple and extreme. On the one hand, they represent the most confident establishment of a four AS norm (and possibly with the highest proportion of students taking five subjects). On the other hand, they demonstrate virtually no engagement with the vocational or applied aspects of the reform (Savory, Hodgson and Spours, 2001, p30).

The significance of the Institute of Education data is that it asks questions not only about whether students would be encouraged to integrate academic and vocational learning, but also about which students would and also how they would. For example, an institution that expressed clear support for 'mixing and matching' might really only be saying that many students would be continuing to follow a predominantly 'vocational' timetable (the full twelve unit VCE) but might also be encouraged to opt for one additional subject in the first year.

When 'academic' institutions are examined the findings from the Savoy, Hodgson and Spours research was even more conclusive. Amongst the selective and independent schools, which in the past had generally ignored the GNVQ, there was little indication of any move to include a VCE in their student programmes. Thus, for one particular institution:

There was never a question that a school like this would introduce vocational courses as a result of this kind of change (Savory, Hodgson and Spours, 2001, p27)

This statement illustrates how institutional differences had continued to reinforce the academic and vocational divide. Even though this particular statement was made before both the VCE and *Curriculum 2000* had become properly established, there is still little evidence to suggest that when Advanced level students select their courses they give equal weight to the VCE.

In their 2003 review of *Curriculum 2000* for example, OFSTED found it necessary to report that:

For most young people, the added breadth, resulting from the new arrangements has been, at best modest...Most young people seen were taking four, rarely five subjects in Year 12... many students chose to do relatively narrow 'suites' of subjects. Moreover, although vocational provision was becoming more widely available, even in school sixth forms, and some AVCE students were taking AS subjects, it was rare to find AS students adding AVCE single awards to their programmes (OFSTED, 2003, p3).

More recent research by Savory, Hodgson and Spours (2003) paints a similar picture. Estimating that the proportion of Advanced students mixing the academic GCE and vocational VCE has been at a disappointing level of only 20% they conclude:

Undoubtedly this represents an increase over the old advanced level system, where mixing was a tiny minority pattern, but it is considerably less than the Government had perhaps been hoping for (Hodgson, Spours and Savory 2003, p4).

For Hodgson and Spours (2003), the status of VCE is higher than that enjoyed by the GNVQ, but it is still not equal to GCE A-levels. 'Learners still see VCEs and the

learners who take them as second class'. For Savory, Hodgson and Spours (2003) the quest for parity with academic qualifications, has come at a price.

## **VCEs and higher education**

There is a growing suspicion that the older 'selecting' universities are dragging their feet and preferring instead to rely on the traditional three or four A-level package. Many fear that this could critically undermine the government's attempt to broaden sixth form study.

Simon Midgley *The Guardian* Oct 31<sup>st</sup> 2000

At the beginning of this chapter it was argued that the re launch of the GNVQ as a VCE was at least in part, the result of its increased significance as a university entrance qualification. The section that follows examines the response of higher education to the VCE.

## **VCE and the new UCAS tariff.**

In an attempt to facilitate the change to *Curriculum 2000*, but also as a way of boosting the status of the VCE and the new key skills qualifications UCAS produced a new points tariff. The tariff enabled different sorts of qualifications including the 3-unit VCE and key skills to be part of a common points scale. As the table below

shows, equivalent grades for VCE and GCE were awarded the same number of points, implying that universities should no longer need to distinguish between them. In the absence of any overarching certificate, the UCAS tariff (see extract below) became the main way of encouraging higher education institutions to give parity to vocational and academic learning.

Points	Key Skills Units	3-unit VCE AS level	6-unit VCE A2 GCE*	Double VCE UCAS Tarrif
10	Level 2			
20	Level 3			
40		C	E	
50		B		
60		A	D	
80			C	EE
100			B	DE
120			A	DD
140				CD

www.ucas.ac.uk

According to the UCAS advice to both universities and potential students (UCAS, 2000) points scores could be aggregated from different qualifications, e.g. from GCE- A level/Advanced Subsidiary / VCE a level/Advanced Subsidiary as well as key skills. There would be no ceiling to the number of points which could be accumulated, thereby recognising the full breadth and depth of students'

achievements. UCAS in partnership with the DfEE and QCA also went to considerable lengths to brief universities about the post-16 changes and urged them to:

Consider the benefits of mixed programmes, e.g. a mix of Advanced Subsidiary GCE, Advanced GCE and the smaller sizes of Vocational A levels.....publish a policy concerning six-unit Vocational A-level (UCAS, June, 2000b.)

During the launch of *Curriculum 2000*, UCAS surveyed the responses of HE institutions to the new qualifications structure. The data below concentrates primarily on university attitudes to VCE as a university entrance qualification. It uses aggregates compiled by UCAS but also specific comments from institutions which UCAS encouraged them to post on its web site.

In relation to aggregate totals, by September 2000 UCAS had collected 60 responses and by December it had 77 statements on its site. Out of the respondents only 25 % of post-1992 universities said they would 'encourage' students to hold VCEs. Another 56% said they would 'accept' but the remainder made no clear comment. 21% of pre-1992 universities said that they would 'encourage' students to hold VCEs while a further 26% said they would 'accept'. Only 17% of Higher Education colleges said they would 'encourage,' although another 75% said they would 'accept.'

As was the case with schools and colleges outlined above, there were clear divisions within the university sector on vocational- academic mixing. Only 13% of

old universities said they would 'encourage' mixed general/vocational programmes, while a further 35% said they would 'accept' them, (the remainder making no specific comment or no statement). The responses were more favourable from the new universities with 31% saying they would encourage students to mix, and another 56% saying that they would 'accept' combinations. (Amongst HE colleges, 33% said they would encourage them with another 42% saying they would 'accept' mixed programmes).

What did the initial statements about *Curriculum 2000* on university websites tell us about particular university responses? Below, three pre-1992 and three post-1992 institutions have been compared. To coincide with the student case studies in section three, institutions in the London area and in East Anglia have been used. With the exception of the University College of London material, all the statements were collected in December 2000.

### **Defending the gold standard. UCL leads the way**

Even before the UCAS survey, University College London had already circulated a letter to schools and colleges outlining its views on aspects of the reforms. Wanting to emphasise that 'UCL welcomes the objectives of broadening the 16-19 curriculum,' they also pointed out that:



Offers of admission ...will normally be based upon specific grades in three subjects at A-level and a pass or the equivalent, such as the three unit advanced GNVQ. ( letter from UCL to schools, September 2000)

It was not clear from the letter whether UCL would regard the six-unit GNVQ as constituting one of these A-levels or the twelve-unit GNVQ as being equal to two. However, in it schools and colleges are told that:

UCL has examined the (UCAS) tariff in some detail and is unhappy with both its structure and the equivalencies that it incorporates. Consequently I must advise you that this new tariff is not recognised by UCL and will play no part in the process of selecting students for admission to the college.

The UCAS website included the following London the London School of Economics statement:

LSE welcomes the recent proposals for a broadening of the post-16 curriculum. We will carefully consider the whole of an application; the breadth of the subject studied and will take into account performance at GCSE and AS level in that context. However, conditional offers for all undergraduate programmes will continue to be made on the basis of three full A levels.

Whilst LSE can appreciate the general usefulness of the UCAS Tariff, we will not be implementing it in terms of our own admissions criteria and procedures. We

) will continue to require specific grades in particular subjects in acceptable academic qualifications ..... Vocational subjects and those applied to arts, crafts and practical skills, or to areas of study drawing on several subjects, will normally only be considered if they are taken in combination with two traditionally academic subjects at A level. Since the technical and vocational subjects currently offered in the Advanced GNVQ are not particularly appropriate to the subjects studied at LSE, we would normally expect such candidates to take at least one, but preferably two, A levels in traditional academic subjects ([www.ucas.ac.uk](http://www.ucas.ac.uk)).

Both the UCL and LSE statements stood in sharp contrast to the one posted by the University of Westminster.

) The University welcomes government plans set out in *Qualifying for Success* to broaden students' post-16 study experience from 2000 onwards. It is our understanding that the majority of candidates will be taking four subjects at AS level and carry either two or three of these to A2 level. Progression to A2 will be a requirement in at least two subjects for entry to degree courses at the University of Westminster. In certain subjects areas there will be specific subject requirements at A2 level (e.g. Biology and one other science are required for BSc Biomedical-Science).

The new GNVQ will be acceptable for entry whether taken on its own or in combination with AS/A2 levels. The introduction of the common grading of A-E and the increased rigour of the award are particularly welcomed. Students must

obtain a minimum of 12 units for entry although it should be noted that many courses would require 18 units. As the (UCAS) tariff system evolves, the University will integrate it into its selection process but will continue to express offers for certain programmes in terms of grades. Where the tariff is used, a conditional offer will specify the subjects and/or awards from which the total points should be achieved. ([www.ucas.ac.uk](http://www.ucas.ac.uk))

The posting from Hertfordshire was still more accommodating:

Conditional offers will generally be phrased in terms of the new UCAS tariff and all recognised qualifications will normally be allowed to count towards satisfaction of the conditions.....We shall particularly welcome applications from those mixing academic and vocational qualifications.

Over at the University of East Anglia:

UEA welcomes the qualifications changes...a framework that will allow greater comparability between academic and vocation qualifications.

However, the statement goes on to remind prospective applicants that UEA will also require depth in certain areas. It says that the minimum requirements for entry to UEA will be 2(A2) levels or a 12 unit GNVQ/VCE and it is expected that most applicants will be converting four As levels into 3 A2s in year 13.

East Anglia's newest university, Anglia Polytechnic University issued the following statement:

APU welcomes the developments contained within *Curriculum 2000* and is currently developing its detailed policies in respect of the impact of Curriculum 2000 on decisions regarding admissions and is assessing the potential impact of the changes on its own curriculum. It is thought inappropriate at this stage to prescribe the detailed entry requirements for each course. APU sees *Curriculum 2000* as a positive change, which presents both the University and all applicants with increased options... In particular, we anticipate the prospect of attracting learners with a broader and more varied educational experience. The opportunities that some applicants will have had to study a mix of academic and vocational qualifications will result in an even more varied student body, thus bringing added benefits to the University.

Examining responses of universities to VCE at the end of 2002, Waring, Hodgson, Savory and Spours, (2003) report that there has been little in the way of a significant change, noting that:

Where Advanced GNVQs had been accepted, in the past, universities had no problem in accepting AVCEs...Otherwise many courses continued to restrict entry to those offering three traditional A-levels, although some were prepared to

‘consider’ a six-unit VCE as one element in the learners programme... Pre 1992 universities have shown little evidence of specific use of the VCE qualification to date. (Waring, Hodgson, Savory and Spours 2003, p 21-22).

The authors also point to limited and selective use of the new UCAS tariff. While 40% of 2002 offers used the tariff, the pre-1992 universities used the tariff in under 15% of cases preferring to ask for specific grades in traditional academic subjects.

To put it rather starkly, two grade As and a B in traditional academic A-levels may well get you a place on a popular course at a top university, whereas two Cs and two Ds in a mixture of A-levels and AVCEs, plus Key Skills Units at level 3 almost certainly will not. Yet using the new UCAS Tariff these rank as the same level of achievement in points terms.

(Waring, Hodgson, Savory and Spours, 2003, p27)

## **Conclusions**

This chapter has examined the transformation of GNVQ into a VCE, a vocational A-level. It has argued that these changes have been the result of the need to increase the academic rigour of the qualification so as to improve the status of GNVQ/VCE as a university entrance qualification and also to establish it as legitimate alternative to GCE A-levels within *Curriculum 2000*. However, the initial evidence on the effects of these changes suggested that the VCE continued to be regarded as inferior to

academic qualifications by both schools and universities. In other words despite the egalitarian language of *Curriculum 2000*, as has been the case with the Advanced GNVQ, the exchange value of VCE as a credential has remained inferior to that of the GCE A-level.

Despite official enthusiasm for mixing vocational and academic study, the evidence supports the claim in chapter 2 that the underlying aim of post-16 policy, particularly from the Dearing review onwards, has been to try and ensure that many of the new generation of post-16 students are directed onto vocational education courses, rather than enrolling on GCE A-levels. In other words the policy initiatives have been primarily concerned with ‘cooling out;’ accommodating new students within, rather than challenging the academic-vocational divide in the way that education reformers and ‘modernisers’ have argued.

The chapter that follows will argue that the implementation of the key skills qualifications has followed a similar pattern. It argues that like the VCE, key skills have continued to have an uncertain status and a contradictory pedagogy. Chapter 6 will examine the implications of the Tomlinson working group for vocational and academic qualifications and will act as a conclusion to the second part of this thesis.

## **Chapter five**

### **Key for what? Key for whom? The story of key skills**

This chapter devotes specific attention to 'key skills'. As has been the case with the earlier analysis of GNVQ, it seeks to place the development of key skills in a wider context. It assesses arguments that key skills represent new inter-transferable generic competencies. But it also discusses the position of key skills as an alternative to academic qualifications in English and Maths. Finally it examines the place of key skills in *Curriculum 2000* and also the response of higher education.

As has been the case with the GNVQ, this chapter argues that there is little direct connection between key skills and the perceived post-Fordist changes in the economy. Institutional responses from schools, colleges and universities to key skills have varied, depending on the status of the institution. Like the changes to GNVQ, the emergence of key skills has not transcended the academic-vocation divide. Rather, it has reinforced it.

#### **Filling the skills deficit? Key Skills and employers**

Within the framework of vocational awards developed in the 1980s by the National Council for Vocational Qualification's (NCVQ), 'core skills' represented 'generic

competencies.’<sup>43</sup> Communication, Application of Number and Information Technology all became mandatory requirements in the GNVQ. Employers providing NVQs were also urged to include at least some aspect of core skills training and proficiency in key skills became a requirement for those young people following Modern Apprenticeships.

‘Core’ units have been a feature of vocational courses in FE colleges since the 1970s. In 1979, the Further Education Unit published ‘*A Basis for Choice*’ which developed the idea of a core curriculum for the vocational student. The introduction of core skills was justified in terms of the need to improve young peoples’ ability to negotiate changing employment patterns, particularly where services and new communications industries requiring ‘interpersonal’ skills, were replacing manufacturing. But also where ‘mass production’ and rigid occupational/craft demarcation were giving way to ‘multi skilling’.

Though they often appeared under other titles, - for example as ‘social and life skills,’ core programmes were included in many of the Manpower Services Commission initiatives that grew up in the shadow of rising levels of youth unemployment in the 1970s and 1980s. Likewise, a range of modules, such as ‘communication’, ‘personal and career development’ and ‘problem solving,’ also featured prominently in the short lived Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education (CPVE).

There has been considerable support for the teaching of core skills from employer representatives. According to the CBI ( Jessop 1991 p81), core skills

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<sup>43</sup> According to Gilbert Jessop, ‘the essential feature of core skills is that they are common to many activities (Jessop 1991 p 80).



should be seen as a way of making education in schools more relevant to the world of work. Employer surveys continued to show, for example, that skills like 'team working' and 'problem solving' were both highly desirable, and in short supply<sup>44</sup>. According to the DfEE's *Labour Market and Skills Trends* (2000) when employers did report a skills gap, information technology, customer handling and general communication skills figured prominently. Also lacking were 'management skills, team working skills and skills to manage own development' (DfEE, 2000a, p24).

Colin Waugh (1997), has argued that the pressure to introduce core skills teaching has come in particular, from the capital intensive/high skills and 'European' wing of business rather than from the 'neo-Thatcherite' (and pro US) low skill/low wage factions.<sup>45</sup> For others however, the demand for a new 'core' was more a reflection of the move from Fordist to 'post-Fordist' production techniques and it was argued that educational institutions now had the opportunity to develop new styles of learning to replace, or at least transform, the elitist and hierarchical/subject organised schools of the Fordist/mass production era (Brown & Lauder 1992). Yet if core skills have been at the heart of more radical and 'futurist' curriculum blueprints (Bayliss/RSA 1999), their significance was also to be recognised by reforming conservatives such as Lord Dearing, who at one stage, in the run up to *Curriculum 2000*, had recommended that A-level students took an AS in key skills.

But though the NCVQ model of core skills was designed to reflect a changing agenda, for others, key skills have still remained contentious. For example, core skills came under heavy attack from those with more traditional ideas about education

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<sup>44</sup> the 'wider' key skills of *problem solving, working together and improving your own learning* have never been mandatory.

<sup>45</sup> See NATFHE *General Educator* no 41 and 65

and training. As part of his offensive against the GNVQ, Professor Smithers (1993; 1995) also attacked what he described as the obscure and incomprehensible language surrounding the core skill specifications. He claimed that it was not possible to attribute core skills with any independent existence, in that they would always be integral to the content of courses they were included in. NCVQ's core skills were also criticised by those seen to be broadly in sympathy with the 'moderniser' agenda. Thus for Green (1997a), the NCVQ version of core skills could only constitute a poor substitute for the general education that continued to be a feature of vocational courses in other countries but was significantly absent in Britain.

Core skills have emerged out of an historical absence in the UK. Alone among the major European nations in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, England developed a technical and vocational education that had no inherent connection with general education and schooling (Green, 1997a, p90).

According to Kelly (2001), the introduction of core skills can be seen as an attempt to resolve the disparity between the traditional and backward looking British/liberal paradigm, in which technical education and vocational training was regarded as being not only inferior to academic learning, but also to be strictly utilitarian and confined to the requirements of a particular job and a European approach which believed that technical knowledge should be mixed with an element of general education so as to develop the powers of good expression and communication required by enlightened citizens.

One difficulty with Kelly's argument however, is that the types of key skills that have been promoted are not necessarily those that fit most congenially with what the CBI had identified as being most important. For example *Improving Your Own Learning, Problem Solving and Working With Others*, were marginalised in the GNVQ specifications. To complete GNVQ students were only really encouraged to demonstrate ability in *Communication, Application of Number and IT*. In *Curriculum 2000* the other three were also reclassified as 'wider skills'<sup>46</sup>.

### **Key Skills in Curriculum 2000**

As with the changes to GNVQ, the new Key Skills (as core skills became known as post-Dearing) for *Curriculum 2000*, originated from the Capey Report (1995). Ridden of the jargon that accompanied the original NCVQ version, the specifications were now claimed by QCA to be leaner cleaner and meaner. In contrast to the NCVQ model, where skills were simply required to be demonstrated in vocational contexts - reflecting what students could *do*, the new specifications required students to possess specific factual knowledge. These requirements were outlined in a '*what you must know*' category, constituting section A in the key skills specifications. Student knowledge would be assessed through an externally set, one hour, multi-choice paper at levels 1 and 2, or in a longer written test from level 3 - the level that most Advanced level students were to be encouraged to aim for. Skill application, on

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<sup>46</sup> From 2005 however, it is expected that students reaching level 2 in the wider skills were awarded UCAS points.

the other hand described in the 'what you must do' part of the specifications, (which constituted section B) would continue to be assessed through portfolio evidence.

### **Easing the burden for teachers and students?**

As was the case with the GNVQ, the extensive pruning of the Key Skill specifications could be interpreted as being primarily a response to the concerns of teachers and lecturers about the workload manageability of key skills (NATFHE 1995). With practitioners being urged to integrate key skills into GNVQ delivery, the assessment of key skills required extensive mapping and recording, not to mention endless cross referencing and box ticking. Pressure for key skills to be certified separately, also came from vocational awarding bodies who continued to express anxiety about the 'disproportionate impact' of key skills assessment on GNVQ programmes (Joint Council Annual Report 1998).

If the nature of what students were now being asked to do was simplified, the number of tasks and in particular, the number of times students must carry them out was significantly reduced. It is worth comparing aspects of the new specifications with those of the original NCVQ version, where for level 3 element 1 in Communication, students were required to provide evidence of:

Records of observation by the assessor of the student's participation in at least four one to one discussions. These discussions should provide opportunities for

students to give and obtain information and exchange ideas on both straightforward and complex subjects. Two of the discussions should involve people who do not know the student and are unfamiliar with the subject.

Records of observation by the assessor of the students participation in at least four group discussions. These discussions should provide opportunities for students to give and obtain information and exchange ideas on both straightforward and complex subjects. Two of the discussions should involve people who do not know the student and are unfamiliar with the subject.

Assessors should observe the student making contributions which are relevant to the subject and purpose of the discussion and involve giving and obtaining information and exchanging ideas. Assessors should also observe the students capacity to listen to others in order to confirm that s/he has understood others contributions, to create opportunities for others to contribute and respond appropriately with contributions that take forward the discussion. The subject and purpose of discussion should vary from one subject to another to another in order to demonstrate that the student is able to make contributions on different subjects in way suited to different audiences listed in the range.

By way of a contrast, in the new *Curriculum 2000* level 3 Communication unit students were required simply to:

Contribute to a group discussion about a complex subject. Make a presentation about a complex subject, using at least one image to illustrate complex points.

In comparison with the NCVQ requirements which were cross referenced to an extensive list of ‘performance criteria,’ the QCA requirements are accompanied by much clearer advice to assessors about what to look for and whether the student can

- Make clear and relevant contribution in a way that suits your *purpose* and situation.
- Listen and respond sensitively to others, and develop points and ideas.
- Create opportunities for others to contribute when appropriate.

But if there had been a reduction in portfolio requirements, teachers would now also have to prepare their students for the new multi-choice tests. The tests, which would be available five times a year <sup>47</sup> had the potential to be both an administrative nightmare and a heavy drain on centre resources, particularly in schools. Thus, according to the OFSTED/FEFC Key Skill pilot report, teachers continued to find the formal assessment and recording ‘very time consuming.’ Arguably practitioners had little influence over the construction of the new key skills. According to a NATFHE internal survey in 2001 they continued to find the workload issues significant with 87% of lecturers finding key skills specifications ‘difficult’ or ‘very difficult’ to manage and only 6% considering that they had a positive effect on their teaching.

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<sup>47</sup> ‘On demand’ tests became available to centres from September 2004

### **Communication and Number or Maths and English?**

Like the new GNVQ, the *Curriculum 2000* key skills specifications increasingly mirrored the characteristics of academic qualifications. Even if FEEDA and the DfEE continued to remind practitioners that Key Skills were not Maths and English (Key Skills News November 2000), from the content of the first set of test papers produced by QCA, teachers could be forgiven for assuming this.

In the level 3 Communication test for example, source materials like newspaper articles and extracts from books provided the basis for written questions and appeared to fit easily with GCSE level English. To meet the Application of Number requirements students had to make calculations, analyse data and apply mathematical formula through a series of questions that had minimal vocational context, or had little relationship to each other. In fact, according to teachers at a Manchester grammar school, the standards that were now required for level 3 number and communication portfolios had also shifted considerably. In a letter to the TES (04/05/01), they complained that:

Parts of Communication level 3 were degree level standards... requirements for Application of Number were so demanding that only students doing AS level mathematics have managed to fulfil them.

The extent of the academic drift of key skills was illustrated by the fact that accompanying the new specifications was an 'exemptions' list for candidates who already had particular academic qualifications. For example, students with a GCSE

Mathematics pass were excused the external assessment in level 2 Application of Number where, according to the OFSTED /FEFC report on the pilot:

The Application of Number tests were tackled successfully by a large majority of students in schools and mathematically able students in colleges, mainly because the questions were similar in style and demand to those with which both staff and students were familiar for general certificate of secondary education (GCSE). The tests caused more difficulties for those students who had not been successful in GCSE. (OFSTED/FEFC, 2000, p7).

### **Key Skills or Basic Skills?**

Core Skills are not basic skills. Core Skills are about dealing with real problems found in the work context.... they are about being able to cope with ever changing demands and being able to adapt to new situations. They are important to people working in all levels of jobs, from basic craft to professional and management.

(NCVQ Core Skills in GNVQs: Principles and Practice (1995))

If academic drift was evident at level 3, then at level 2 and level 1, key skills were to become at least partially aligned with the government's 'basic skills' programme.<sup>48</sup>

A 'back to basics' philosophy has been associated with the emergence of the New

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<sup>48</sup> Since 2001 level 1 and 2 key skills Communication and Number have used the same multi choice papers as Adult Literacy and Numeracy.



Right in education, though the New Labour government have continued to be influenced by Conservative thinking (Docking 2000; Hill 1999). The increased concern with improving basic skills has also been consistent with Labour's emphasis on preventing 'social exclusion.'

In the DfEE survey referred to earlier, a fifth of respondents thought there were skill deficiencies in numeracy and literacy. The document concluded that 'basic skills for adults is clearly a problem' (DfEE 2000a, p42) and welcomed the commissioning of Sir Claus Moser to investigate ways of improving them. From his investigations, Moser claimed controversially, that nearly 20% of 19 year olds in England struggled with basic literacy and numeracy.

There is no point in having a great programme for lifelong learning if the first step on the ladder, being able to read and write, has not been reached. Without this you have fallen off the ladder. (TES 26/3/99)

) The profile given to improving basic skills was a significant pull on the new key skills specifications. Following Moser's report (*Fresh Start* DfEE, 1999) new literacy and numeracy tests were established. At Entry Level, (below level 1), the tests were officially seen to be on a par with early stages of the school National Curriculum, but at their higher levels they were designed to overlap with level 1 and level 2 Key Skills. In other words, at levels 1 and 2 basic skills and key skills candidates would now take the same tests.

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According to an Education Minister of the time, Baroness Blackstone, the new basic skills tests set up as a result of the Moser report would also ‘underpin the level 1 and 2 Key Skills qualification.’<sup>49</sup> But if Basic Skills and Key Skills tests at level 1 and 2 were to be drawn from a common multi-choice question bank, then the problem for policy makers was to continue to prevent the distinctions between basic and key skills becoming blurred. Thus as Chris Hughes Chief Executive of FEDA, writing in *Education Journal* complained:

Teachers, parents and employers often misunderstand the relationship between key skills and basic skills. There is an urgent need to clarify the relationship between the two. They are different, but equally important and can work alongside each other. Basic skills are defined as the ability to read, write and speak in English, and use maths at a level necessary to function at work...Key Skills were developed in the 1980s. They are defined as the skills needed to succeed in work, education and everyday life.

(*Education Journal* March 2000, p8)

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According to Hughes, those who met the basic skills requirements at entry level and then progressed to level 1 and 2 could then move on to key skills. In other words a linear model of skill acquisition was now being promoted:

According to *Education Journal* (03/2000, p8) Adult Literacy and Adult Numeracy skills can be defined as “the ability to read, write and speak in English and to use

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<sup>49</sup> See *Key Skills News* 1 (DfEE 2000)

mathematics at a level necessary to function at work and in society in general". Having the key skills takes the student further; the student will have the basic skills but can independently select and apply those skills, and progress to improve on those skills.

The key skills tests at levels 1 and 2 in communication and application of number also act as the tests for Adult Literacy and Adult Numeracy. This means that candidates can achieve a literacy or numeracy qualification by passing an external test. Candidates who gain the adult literacy and numeracy certificates based on passing these tests can then progress to achieving the full key skills qualifications if they wish.

Elsewhere, in the introduction to FEDA's *Key Skills in A-levels* guide (FEDA 2000) and as part of an attempt to convince practitioners of their complementary nature, it was suggested that rather than trying to identify the conceptual differences between basic skills and key skills it was more useful to distinguish between 'underpinning techniques' and 'key skills.'

The learner may first learn the techniques of multiplication by 'doing sums'...Next they might learn how to calculate the area of a rectangle by multiplying the length by the breadth. However it is only when they are asked to calculate the area of a space and work out the cost of fitting a carpet ...that they are applying the techniques in a context to solve a problem (FEDA mailing to schools and colleges, Sept. 2000 p2/3).

However, the Basic Skills Agency continued to be frank about the nature of basic skills compared to key skills.

What do we mean by “Basic Skills”? We’re not talking about IT or personal or social skills but about... the ability to read, write and speak in English and use mathematics at a level necessary to function and progress at work and in society in general<sup>50</sup>

The muddying of the waters between basic skills and key skills did not help to improve the status of the latter with more prestigious institutions. To confuse matters further there were also examples of some of the post-1992 universities providing their own ‘key skills’ courses for students who, they considered needed additional support with essay writing and elementary mathematics.<sup>51</sup>

### **Key for whom? How did schools and colleges use key skills?**

The previous chapter considered institutional responses to the VCE. It argued that there continued to be significant differences in the response of ‘selective’ and ‘recruiting’ institutions over the standing of VCE. This was also true for key skills. According to the UCAS survey on preparation for *Curriculum 2000* referred to in the previous chapter, whereas almost all comprehensive schools and FE colleges

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<sup>50</sup> Basic Skills Agency website 23/06/00

<sup>51</sup> For example, In Nov 2003 Thames Valley University in Ealing advertised for a key skills lecturer to provide ‘learning support’ while London Metropolitan teach study skills through a key skills website.

had made provision for offering key skills, in sharp contrast there appeared to be much lower take up rates amongst grammar and independent schools.

The survey also suggested that only a minority of institutions (just over 20% of respondents, mostly further education and sixth form colleges) intended to provide opportunities in all three key skills (students who gained all three regardless of the level would be awarded a general Key Skills certificate). While this survey should not be seen as particularly conclusive - as many schools said they would be introducing key skills programmes gradually, it also showed major differences in the levels of commitment towards key skills, between maintained schools and those in the independent sector.

Data from the Savory, Hodgson and Spours case studies of *Curriculum 2000* painted an even bleaker picture. Amongst the selective and independent schools in this survey, it suggested that only 2% of students were going to be entered for key skills. The data also showed that in 'lower attaining' comprehensive schools up to 70% of students on Advanced level courses would be entered for key skills. This compared with 49% in 'higher attaining' and 62% in 'middle-attaining' schools.

Finally, in November 2001, the National Union of Teachers produced its own internal findings based on returns from 300 plus schools and colleges. According to the NUT, 46% of the AS teachers responding were including key skills in their courses and that English, Biology, Art, Design and Photography were the subjects most likely to be incorporating key skills. The subjects least likely included mathematics, physics and PE. However the sample for each subject was small and therefore should not be regarded as definitive.

## **Key Skills and Universities**

Increasing numbers of universities are stressing the importance of key skills as part of their admission policies. They are developing statements on the skills, aptitudes and qualifications that candidates will need for particular courses. Over seventy institutions have already provided such statements and in the majority of cases key skills can count towards meeting entry requirements.

(DfES/QCA broadsheet on key skills, Feb 2002)

As these comments imply, the changes to key skills could be seen as a consequence of the need to convince universities about the validity of key skills. Within the new UCAS tariff for example a student completing the three key skills to level 3 was able to claim points equal to that awarded for a grade A pass in the new AS level qualification and grade D for a full A-level. UCAS and the DfEE urged higher education institutions to publish a 'clear policy on key skills.'

Statements about the value of key skills continued to be posted on university websites, but though almost all universities 'welcomed' them, they made their comments carefully. In spite of the optimism of the DfEE and QCA, only a tiny minority of institutions were prepared to incorporate key skill qualifications in offers. Judging from the significant number of omissions, it could be concluded that many universities still knew little about the nature of key skills, and that if they did, they

were still reluctant to accredit them with real esteem. For example, students without GCSEs in Maths and English, but able to reach level 2 in Communication and Application of Number were arguably, still less likely to be offered a degree place than those who also have GCSEs. These students might find they were also asked to take a university's own tests in maths and English.

According to one study (ASDAN/Institute of Education, 2000) key skills were regarded with 'scepticism' by both 'selecting' and 'recruiting' universities. According to UCAS (2003)<sup>52</sup> not one of the pre 1992 universities specified key skills as part of an offer and only 6.1% of offers from the post 1992 universities included key skills. But if Waring, Hodgson, Savory and Spours concluded that universities had not been impressed by what they had heard about key skills, then after leaving his position as QCA's Chief Executive, David Hargreaves was to make some scathing comments about the attitudes of sections of Higher Education.

To the students' dismay, some admissions officers pleaded total ignorance of the key skills. Others told the students that these were irrelevant to admission, and that only the specified A-level grades really counted. This happened even where the official university policy towards key skills was positive (TES 12/04/02).

The response of higher institutions affected the status of key skills badly. If, for many, the link between key skills and the world of work appeared dubious, then neither did they have much in the way of an exchange value as an educational credential. According to student Ellie Robinson for example:

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<sup>52</sup> [wwwucas.com](http://wwwucas.com).

I have attended few key skills lessons. I have only two hours of free time a fortnight in school. I also face a heavy workload.... key skills appear pointless. They have little value when applying to higher education...it is also debatable whether employers will understand or value yet another new qualification. In lessons on the application of number we go over the same material we covered in the higher-level maths GCSE coursework (letter to TES 06/4/01).

### **Wither key skills?**

DfES statistics for 2002/2003<sup>53</sup> (SFR 11/2004 29/04/04) showed that between Oct 2000 and September 2003, 582 000 key skill unit awards were made to 310 000 candidates. These totals appear impressive, but even the 263 000 awards made in 2002/3 is small when compared against the number of A-levels awarded (see chapter 6). What is also significant is the mix of awards, with just 15% being achieved at level 3 or above, compared with 47% at level 2 and 38% at level 1.

In the run up to the start of the second year of *Curriculum 2000* and in anticipation of widespread withdrawal - particularly by schools, QCA announced the results of a 'review' of key skills. From September 2001 it would no longer be expected that all students would achieve at least three key skills at level 3 and that students with GCSE grades A\* - C in English, maths or ICT or who were studying these at advanced level would not be expected to take the related key skills unless

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<sup>53</sup> [www.dfes.gov.uk](http://www.dfes.gov.uk) Research and statistics Gateway



they need or wanted to. However it did say that students who did not have GCSE grades A - C in English, maths or ICT would be expected to include the relevant key skills qualification at level 2 in their courses.

This last recommendation reinforced the exchange value of level 2 key skills as a 'proxy' qualification for students without GCSE maths or English wishing to continue in full-time education. It also reinforced the assumption that key skills were an extension of basic skills. They were a way of catching up (Waugh 2004). At the same time, in its 2003 review of *Curriculum 2000*, OFSTED reported that many schools had significantly reduced their commitment to key skills, particularly at level 3. If 'selecting' universities were still likely to ignore key skills, the post-1992 'recruiting' universities would now have the opportunity to provide students with an alternative way of meeting their maths and English entry requirements.

A brief survey of university websites in the summer of 2004, suggests that where new universities require maths and English qualifications they have already started to do this.<sup>54</sup> It is also the case that key skill qualifications may be given a new lease of life as a result of the Tomlinson proposals outlined in the next section. These require all students wanting to gain the proposed new diploma to have reached level 2 in 'functional' maths, English and ICT. These new specifications will form part of a new 14-19 core curriculum. It is expected that specifications for these will be available from 2008 but, according to recommendation 7 in the final report:

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<sup>54</sup> See for example, Westminster, South Bank, Thames Valley- amongst the universities that students from *Inner London* school chapter 7 applied for.

Until the new components are in place, all young people should continue to be encouraged to undertake the available options, such as Key Skills, in these subjects as part of their 14-19 learning programmes.(Working Group on 14-19 Reform, *Interim Report* 2004).

If this is the case it will represent a further confirmation of the trend outlined earlier in this chapter, with key skills gradually taking on the characteristics of basic skills. As with GNVQ/VCE, the significance of key skills (or 'essential skills,' as key skills may be renamed), will be very different to that which Jessop and the NCVQ originally intended.

## Chapter 6

### **Breaking the log-jam? Tomlinson and the future of qualification reform**

#### **The rise and fall of the VCE**

Shortly after the introduction of *Curriculum 2000* in September 2000, I argued in a teacher union journal that:

If vocational qualifications become satellite versions of A-levels and GCSEs there is a danger that some of the positive aspects of vocational education may be lost. Students alienated by traditional forms of academic assessment, but who may have warmed to the approach of vocational education, may find that GNVQs are now simply providing more of the same. Likewise if the new style GNVQ is little different from A-levels, others may wonder if there is any point in doing them in the first place (Allen 2000).

This argument: that VCE is now increasingly falling between two stools is further substantiated by Spours and Hodgson. In the conclusion to their research on *Curriculum 2000*, for example, they argue that VCE now represents ‘the worst of both worlds.’ Reviewing the responses to the VCE, from the teachers and lecturers in their sample they conclude:

On the positive side, a minority thought that the specifications were clearer and that external assessment was fairer and more rigorous than the type of assessment in GNVQ. On the negative side, the majority of teachers found that the VCE combined the worst of both worlds. External tests that demotivated learners and put them under pressure, combined with echoes of an NVQ assessment methodology which insisted on coverage of grade-related criteria and extensive portfolio evidence (Hodgson and Spours, 2003 p 112).

OFSTED,<sup>55</sup> in their evaluation of the first two years of the VCE, also conclude that:

The VCE is not well designed. It is neither seriously vocational, or consistently advanced...course specifications lack vocational content and are therefore too similar to GCE A-level (OFSTED 2004, p2).

OFSTED also claimed there was evidence of colleges raising entry requirements in the belief that VCE were more demanding. As a result the number the number of students progressing from Intermediate level was falling, (OFSTED, 2004, p9). The argument that VCE is regarded as being 'too academic' by many teachers and lecturers has continued to gather momentum. According to the TES (26/04/02) for example,<sup>56</sup> students are quitting the new vocational courses in large numbers, because

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<sup>55</sup> *Vocational A-levels: the first two years* (March 2004)

<sup>56</sup> *Students reject vocational A-levels* Stephen Hoare TES FE focus

they find them ‘too academic and inflexible’. To quote Eileen Carpenter, vocational A-level business coordinator for Barking College:

VCEs are as hard as HNDs. Students who would have chosen Advanced GNVQs are looking at AS/A2 levels because they have heard they are easier.

James Hampton, the Principle of Yeovil College is equally forthright.

Over the past five years a series of very good qualifications have been screwed-up by people who know nothing about them, who only have experience of A-levels. Whole groups of young people have been very badly served.<sup>2</sup>

The fall in the popularity of GNVQ is confirmed by the first set of full results for VCE and *Curriculum 2000*. As the evidence below illustrates and as the OFSTED report referred to above also notes, student entries for both the single and double version of the VCE as a whole, have been much lower than those for GCE qualifications.

**Total AS/A2/VCE entries**  
Source Joint Council for General Qualifications [www.jcgq.org](http://www.jcgq.org)

	2002	2003
<b>AS GCE</b>	995404	1030919
<b>A2 GCE</b>	701380	750537
<b>VCE</b>	32316	40914
<b>Double VCE</b>	42291	43807

But perhaps most significantly, the number of entries for the double VCE is also well below those of its predecessor the Advanced GNVQ, the mainstay of the post-16 vocational pathway. The figures for both single and double VCE compare unfavourably with those for 1998 on page 122, when the Advanced GNVQ was at its peak and when over 80,000 students expected to complete. Almost 30,000 of these were on business studies courses (Joint Council Report, 1998).

In addition to the low levels of entry, the percentage performance for each of the pass grades in the single VCE do not, as the table below shows, compare very favourably with those for GCE A level that year.

	A	B	C	D	E
<b>VCE</b>	5.0	11.2	19.0	23.4	21.0
<b>GCE</b>	20.9	23.7	24.0	17.3	9.6

Finally, even though 13.5% of all 2003 students reached the equivalent of the old 'distinction' - comparable to those who gained a distinction in 1998; those gaining the equivalent to the old merit, a C pass is well down on the 1998 figure. This is even more significant if the general rise in performance grades for GCE A-level is taken into account. Thus, if as a result of the protracted fall out from the A-level results fiasco of August 2002 described on page 184, public confidence in the new A-levels has been seriously damaged, then the vocational A-level has been experiencing its own silent crisis. The dip in performance levels for VCE went largely unnoticed (Allen 2002).

According to DfES research (2003),<sup>57</sup> while the proportion of students taking vocational qualifications rose to around 42% during the 1990s, it fell to 36 % between 2000 and 2002. The research also suggests that the introduction of the new AS/A2 divisions in *Curriculum 2000* has made the academic pathway more attractive to students because they no longer have to commit themselves to two years of study in a particular subject and can also apply to university on the basis of their AS results.

This confirms what has been argued above. Despite the changes to its content, which have been more significant than changes to its title, VCE has not represented an educational alternative to A-levels in the way that old GNVQ used to. Commenting on these research findings in the *TES* (09/01/04) for example, the Liberal Democrat Education spokesperson Phil Willis claimed, “students see vocational A-levels only as pale imitations of the gold standard qualification”. The first public comments by a mainstream politician on the contradictory nature of the VCE are a reflection of its demise.

### **Key Stage 4 crisis**

If there is going to be a difficult and uncertain time for the VCE, then neither is the future of the vocational GCSE assured. Like VCE, these qualifications will be under pressure from above and below. Not really enjoying the status of ‘academic’ GCEs, it may be difficult to persuade students who intend to opt for academic courses to take the vocational or applied versions instead. Likewise, because they incorporate a

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<sup>57</sup> see Vocational Pathways at Age 18-19. [www.dfes.gov.uk/research](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research). (October 2004)

considerable amount of academic content, the GCEs may like VCE also appear too academic for and not be feasible options for those students who schools wish to exclude from their academic tracks. For example, according to Judith Norrington, of the Association of Colleges:

) Around half of pupils still don't get five GCEs. Vocational GVCEs won't cater for all of them. We need to free up the system to give 14-16 year olds the chance to do qualifications currently only available to older young people (*The Guardian* 05/02/02).

OFSTED also concluded that even though the teaching of VCSEs was generally satisfactory, they did not have clear relationships with employers and that:

) the volume of work pupils do and the breadth and depth of their studies do not always add up to the weight of a double-award GCSE.....In a significant minority of schools, where the courses are largely restricted to low-attaining pupils, the courses do not have parity of esteem with other GCSEs. (OFSTED, 2004b p3/4).

However, QCA claim to have had good feedback and report 'pupils attitudes to be positive'<sup>58</sup> about the new qualifications. They have now officially announced that all Intermediate, Foundation and part one GNVQs will be discontinued from August 2006 and that VCSE, available in eight subject areas will be the main vocational

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<sup>58</sup> [www.qca.org.uk](http://www.qca.org.uk) (14/02/03)



qualification. In future it will also be titled an 'applied' rather than a vocational GCSE. Yet confusion continues about exactly what should constitute a vocational alternative to academic education at key stage four, as a result of Secretary of State Charles Clarke's intentions to increase the number of 14-16 year olds studying vocational subjects to over 180,000 by 2007-8. Clarke has proposed the introduction of 'pre-apprenticeships' for 15 and 16 year olds 'disengaged from learning.'<sup>59</sup> There is also likely to be an extension of 'links' courses on which increasing numbers of 15-16 year old students are offered either part or, in some cases full-time provision at FE colleges, instead of school. There is no clear evidence yet about the extent to which colleges will be able to integrate these young people. An extract from a discussion between a researcher and 15 year olds attending a London FE college published anonymously in *Post-16 Educator No 21* in response to Duckett's (2004) assertion that it represents a progressive paradigm shift, suggests that the experience of school students in FE may not be an entirely productive one,<sup>60</sup> with students complaining about being alienated from main stream college activities and being left to their own devices by teachers. As I have argued elsewhere, a possible scenario is, that many students, not able to enter academic courses will be offered what in effect is a 'basic skills' alternative (Allen 2004a). Subordinate to both the 'academic' and the 'applied /vocational' tracks, they could constitute a third tier.

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<sup>59</sup> see p72 of 2004 White Paper *Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners*

<sup>60</sup> see '14-16: another perspective' *Post-16 Educator No 21*

### **Back to BTEC....?**

Another alternative scenario offered by one practitioner in the *TES* article referred to above, is that because of the need to re engage students there will be a move back to pre-GNVQ vocational courses such as the BTEC National Certificate. (BTEC Firsts continue to be available as level 1 and 2 qualifications and at least one other examination board is about to introduce their own versions). According to Wendy Stevenson at Wisbech College for example, going back to the old BTEC Nationals offers 'far greater flexibility to create assignments that are relevant.' However, it is questionable whether this would represent anything more than a short term solution for those further education colleges who still continue to operate BTEC courses. Because of the smaller scale of their operations, schools are unlikely to go down this route. A mass return to BTEC and a rejection of the VCE would in any case almost certainly result in this qualification suffering the same fate as its predecessor the GNVQ - being given more external assessment and an imposed syllabus. According to the Learning and Skills Research Centre (2003) the continued increase in GCSE performance will result in decreased participation on the vocational route. The report argues that the improved performance at GCSE will be reflected not only in a fall in the demand for level 2 vocational qualifications, but also in a lower take up for level 3. The level at which VCE and the BTEC National Certificate serve as vocational equivalents. Though the report is primarily concerned with the effect that increased academic performance will have on the take up of work based training and Modern Apprenticeships in particular, there are implications for the vocational qualifications in general if a larger proportion of students now continue on the academic route.

**.....Or forward to the baccalaureate?**

Chapter 3 argued that GCE A-levels were still regarded as the prime qualification in post-16 education. However the 'gold standard' of qualifications (as A-levels are known) was to hit crisis point in August 2002. That summer, after they had sat the new style A2 examinations which were introduced as part of *Curriculum 2000*, hundreds of students found they had been given a final grade that was much lower than what they and their school had expected. A war of words raged across the pages of the national press and examination boards were accused of being incompetent. At one stage the then Secretary of State Estelle Morris, called for all scripts to be re-marked. Examination board chiefs then argued that pressure to 'down grade'<sup>61</sup> students had come from QCA itself. The reputation of one of New Labour's brightest stars, David Miliband, recently installed as School Standards Minister, was temporarily tarnished amid claims that he had been involved in a series of summer meetings with QCA about grade fixing. This debacle doubtless contributed amongst other things to Morris's subsequent resignation. Morris announced she was setting up a public enquiry into the results fiasco, which resulted in many young people failing to obtain the university places they had hoped for. Mike Tomlinson, previously OFSTED Chief Inspector was appointed to ensure that, for the short term, the damage

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<sup>61</sup> Examining bodies and QCA were accused of last minute tampering with grade boundaries or of reducing the marks given to students final papers. Though 'normative' assessment of A-levels (known as 'the cap') was abolished in 1982 and students are awarded marks based on the criterion referenced marking schemes the actual grade boundaries are determined after scripts have been marked.

done to A-levels was quickly restored.<sup>62</sup> However he was also asked to produce proposals for the long-term reform of 14-19 qualifications. In his initial report into A-level grading, Tomlinson suggested that one of the reasons for the results crisis had been confusion over the difference between ‘maintaining a standard’ at A-level and the ‘proportion of students meeting the standard.’

Tomlinson’s comments are more significant than they would at first appear. They are a reflection of the deep-rooted tensions which, this thesis has argued, continue to run through the post-16 curriculum changes. These tensions reflect the contradictions between the pressures on the education system to ‘cool out’ different groups of young people by excluding them from higher status qualifications, while at the same time continuing to respond to the needs of individual students to ‘drift up’ the system and allowing the number of entries and as a result, passes in these qualifications to increase. Thus, rather than being seen as what Tomlinson was to describe as ‘an accident waiting to happen’, this thesis has explained *Curriculum 2000* as an uneasy compromise, an attempt to protect the status of A-levels and divert a new cohort of students onto a vocational pathway, while at the same time recognising the demands of reformers for increased opportunities. In attempting to maintain continuity with previous sets of results while also ensuring that new students who meet the requirements are properly accredited, the inevitable losers have been the examination boards and QCA, who in trying to please everybody have ended up pleasing nobody at all.

Though Tomlinson’s working group produced proposals for the short-term

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<sup>62</sup> Tomlinson’s report cleared Ministers of charges of grade rigging, but QCA chief William Stubbs was to lose his job as a result of the enquiry.

survival of Curriculum 2000, most of the interest has been centred on his proposals for the longer-term reform. The working party was given its brief by new Schools Minister, David Miliband. Miliband had been a co- author of the IPPR's British *Baccalaureate* referred to in chapter 4 and from initial statements coming from the new minister, it was clear that his enthusiasm for qualification reform remained. For example, a DfES statement on 14- 19 reforms early in 2003 reported:

Baccalaureate-style qualifications work well in other countries, and we believe that this model, designed to suit English circumstances, could tackle long-standing English problems.

(14-19, *Opportunity and Excellence* 2003, p.8)

As a result of this, The *TES* (24/01/03), felt able to report the Minister's announcement with the headline 'Future without A-levels is on the cards.' For one particular FE college principle, Tomlinson's aim is to challenge the peculiarly British divide between academic and vocational studies and an assessment system shaped by a university selection process no longer fit for purpose<sup>63</sup>. Tomlinson himself, in his progress report of June 2003 promised a 'far reaching agenda for change.'

At the same time, as part of a response to DfES consultation on the 14-19 Green Paper referred to in chapter 2, Spours and Hodgson published a blueprint for an *English Baccalaureate*.<sup>64</sup> Spours and Hodgson, who were to become members of Tomlinson's working group, constructed their proposals around a multi-level diploma. In this, all students would be required to complete a 'core', as well as

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<sup>63</sup> Ruth Silver, Lewisham College, *Guardian Education* 03/02/04.

<sup>64</sup> Circulated by letter in draft form only, Institute of Education (16/5/03).

taking more specialist options, which if still being based on the content of current AS, A2 or VCE units at post-16 would not constitute separate qualifications. The theme around which Spours and Hodgson's proposals are constructed is a familiar one, a modernising agenda needed to ensure international survival. In an introduction, which has much in common with that of *The British Baccalaureate* thirteen years earlier, they argue:

The time has come for the development of an English Baccalaureate System from 14+. In our view, a holistic and strategic approach to curriculum and qualifications reform is required to bring us more in line with our European partners, to develop the broader learning skills required for life long learning.

(Hodgson and Spours, 2003, p1)

### **Tomlinson - something old, something new?**

Tomlinson's working group produced an initial 'progress report' in July 2003 and then an Interim report in February 2004 which set out his main proposals<sup>65</sup>. In a number of respects, Tomlinson's proposals are far reaching and do go well beyond both *Curriculum 2000* and the *14-19 Green Paper*. For example, like Spours and Hodgson, Tomlinson has proposed a series of diplomas, at Entry, Foundation, Intermediate and Advanced level encompassing a wide range of ability from age 14 years onwards. Each diploma will be made up of core, specialist and supplementary

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<sup>65</sup> The final report referred to in the conclusion added detail to, rather than significantly change these proposals.

learning. As with the *English Baccalaureate* proposals, the syllabuses of existing qualifications like GCE, VCE and GCSE will in many cases provide the basis for programmes of specialist learning, but they will no longer constitute qualifications in their own right. (*Interim Report* p44). Thus, Tomlinson argued, the diploma will always be more significant than the parts that constitute it and will become the main qualification for university entry.<sup>66</sup>

But it can also be argued (Allen, 2004a) that Tomlinson is using the diploma framework as window dressing for repackaging vocational-academic divisions to give them more coherence. For example, even though all of the diploma levels will combine a core entitlement,<sup>3</sup> the core is small and does not constitute the sort of general education programme that Spours and Hodgson, but also other reformers have argued for (RSA 1996; NUT 1997). Although the details and the time allocation have yet to be decided, it centres primarily on communication, numeracy and ICT,<sup>67</sup> with the aim of ensuring that students reach level 2 in each of these. For Tomlinson the core represents 'the minimum threshold of skills and knowledge which all young people should acquire' (*Interim Report* p20). However in other respects the core proposals for communication and number which were referred to as 'function' literacy and maths do no more than replicate the key skills approach of *Curriculum 2000*. For the specialist learning programmes (referred to in the report as 'main

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<sup>66</sup> Tomlinson emphasised this at events organized by the NUT (Nov 2003) and Institute of Education (Jan 2004)

<sup>67</sup> In addition, the core will contain an extended project, wider activities and personal planning, review and guidance. The core also includes a requirement for students to participate in 'wider activities' undertake a 'personal review' and to complete a personal research project.

learning’) Tomlinson provides no restrictions for students on what they opt to study at Advanced level. On the contrary, he argues that:

It is our intention that young people should be able to exercise *meaningful* choice about what route they take, the extent to which they specialise, where they learn and how....To make the most of these opportunities, young people must be prepared with the skills and self-awareness to exercise their choices effectively. They need to be supported by information, advice and guidance services tailored to their particular needs (*Interim Report*, p13).

This suggests a curriculum, the shape of which is driven by real student needs and interests, but on the contrary, this thesis has argued that the nature of current post -16 provision is the consequence of the need for a new class settlement, the need to cool out a new generation of learners, through maintaining academic and vocational divisions even if this does involve changing the name and changing the content of qualifications. For example, a major part of Tomlinson’s remit has been to ‘strengthen the structure and content of full time vocational qualifications’ (*Interim Report*, p2). At Advanced level, the Interim Report also proposes that there should be both ‘open’ and ‘specialist’ diplomas. (*Interim Report*, p28.) There are 15 specialist areas listed, including those that fit neatly with existing VCE double awards, for example, business administration and law, leisure travel and tourism and information communication technology.

But even if stand alone vocational qualifications cease to exist, can we anticipate that these vocational pathways will effectively create ‘vocational



diplomas'? These fears are expressed in the response from the National Union of Teachers to the Interim report.

The intention to offer 'open' and 'specialised' diplomas is problematic. Two types of diploma could lead to a two-tier system which relocates rather than eradicates the 'vocational' and 'academic' divide. Open diplomas could replicate the 'general' GCSE/GCE currently in existence and specialized diplomas resemble an AVCE/GNVQ model (NUT 2004, p8).

Tomlinson denies this, arguing that specialist diplomas will also be available for associated academic subjects as well as employment areas (*Interim Report*, p26). But Tomlinson himself cites evidence from QCA (p33), which shows that 80% of AS/A level students currently study subjects, which range across the specialist domains listed in the Interim Report. There will also be opportunities to include vocational options within the open diplomas (*Interim Report*, p35). Yet, as has already been observed in the chapter on *Curriculum 2000*, the amount of vocational and academic mixing students do has historically always been low.

So, even if they will now be seeking to gain diplomas, the educational experiences of many students may remain very much the same. For example, students now doing AS/A2s will be able to study the same subjects through their main learning options and as many of these students will be in the 40% who have already reached level 2 in English, Maths and ICT, there will be little in the way of any additional core compulsion. Those now doing a double VCE will be able to follow the same business or health and social care specialism and if they have not reached level 2 in maths or English, study these as part of the core, just as many of them do

now with key skills. Though The Headmasters Conference (HMC) - the organisation representing large private schools in England and Wales - has been represented on Tomlinson's working party and endorsed the idea of a 'core curriculum,' it is also clear that its members would oppose the loss of any independent identity for A-levels<sup>68</sup>. It is perhaps as a result of these pressures that, in addition to grading the diploma as a whole, at Advanced level Tomlinson's *Interim Report* has included proposals for an extended six or seven point grading range for each component, so as to enable universities differentiate between students (*Interim Report*, p51). QCA chief Ken Boston has gone further and argues that existing qualifications will be 'unitised' (*The Guardian* 18/05/04). This suggests that even though Boston professed to be 'hugely supportive' of Tomlinson's proposals, the diploma may turn into the type of qualifications framework described in chapter 3.<sup>69</sup>

These uncertainties are the result of Tomlinson attempting to reconcile the tensions running through qualification reform. On the one hand he seeks to improve the status of vocational education so as to ensure that those following vocational programmes can be assured of their equal status within the diploma and that they will enable 'drifting up'. On the other hand, as was the case with Dearing's 'pathways,' he has had to ensure that distinctive nature of academic and vocational learning continues.

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<sup>68</sup> A press statement, issued by HMC and the Girls School Association called for A levels and A level grading to be maintained within any new diploma system and also for them to be 'more challenging'. The CBI also published a policy statement at the end of January 2004. This reported members satisfaction with A-levels and a lack of support for a new diploma.

<sup>69</sup> Schools Minister David Miliband also implied that the diploma would be 'built round' existing qualifications (Education and Skills Parliamentary Committee BBC Parliament Channel May 31 04).

## The International Baccalaureate

A final issue relating to the introduction of any new diploma system and an extremely significant one, is the question of 'currency.' Assuming that government would be unwilling and unable to use legislation to secure the status of such a diploma as an inclusive university entrance qualification, it is likely that any serious attempt to replace the significance of A-levels, or to undermine the importance and status of their top grades, would result in elite institutions using alternative qualifications to ensure elite self-recruitment.<sup>70</sup> It is possible for example, that the International Baccalaureate (I.B.) would be increasingly used instead by HMC schools and also by some of the more prestigious 'state' schools. Alternatively, schools might simply make their own arrangements with individual Russell Group universities through an elaborate system of entry examinations.

Ironically, the International Baccalaureate is a broader qualification with an emphasis on teacher moderation rather than on exams. In the IB, students must choose options from six curriculum areas in the first year before specialising in three; they must also do a community/recreational course, an extended research project and

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<sup>70</sup> Though the 2003/4 results did not attract anywhere near the same level of hysteria, the tensions between the role of A-levels in facilitating 'drifting up' and ensuring 'cooling out' were never far from the surface. For example, pass rates for the A2 papers increased by a further 1.1% (Joint Awarding Body August 2003) a situation where 95.4 % students now obtained at least a grade E. Total entries were also up by 7%. The greatest controversy surrounded comments from John Dunford of the Secondary Heads Association. Dunford (*Guardian* 14/08/03) claimed that weaker students were opting for 'easier' subjects (he singled out psychology) to improve their chances of getting to university. This resulted in a hard hitting leader and editorial in *The Times* (15/08/03) which referred to the A-level as an 'exam no student ever fails'. In response to the increased number of A grade passes, ( up from 20.7% to 21.6%) the TES (29/08/03) also carried an article by the Secretary of the HMC Geoff Lucas calling for the introduction of the A\* A-level as a 'means of discriminating the best from the rest.'

a course in the theory of knowledge. However, the IB has more in common with the A-level tradition and as a result in the fall out from the 2002 results debacle, when some schools indicated they were considering replacing A-levels with the IB, the NUT's, education secretary John Bangs was to break ranks with head teacher organisations and claim that the IB was in danger of becoming an 'elitist' replacement (*The Guardian* 24/09/02). Rather than catering for a 'wide range of schools, in a variety of settings', as the International Baccalaureate Organisation claims, the IB provides a qualification for a particular section of an international community, arguably the privately educated children of expatriates working in business or the diplomatic service. As the IBO website<sup>71</sup> states, the IB 'is designed for highly motivated secondary students. Giving access to the world's leading universities. Internationally mobile students are able to transfer from one IB school to another.'

## Conclusion

This chapter has examined the continuing crisis in qualifications. Developing some of the arguments emerging in the previous chapters on GNVQ, VCE and key skills, it has argued that, despite his honourable intentions, Tomlinson will not be able to significantly challenge divisions between academic and vocational learning, divisions which preceding chapters have argued are an essential feature of the new learning arrangements described in chapter 1 and 2. The final section of this thesis is based on a case study of two groups of students on vocational courses. In examining the

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<sup>71</sup> See [www.ibo.org](http://www.ibo.org).

learning careers of these students it seeks to bring an empirical and learner centred perspective to the broader historical framework that has been provided in these chapters

## **Part three**

### **Students and their courses**

#### ***Inner London and Anglia case studies***

## Chapter 7

### ***Inner London. From school to university***

The previous section has described the growth of GNVQ, key skills, the developments behind *Curriculum 2000* and examined the proposals of the Tomlinson working group. It has argued that the creation of and the subsequent changes that were made to GNVQ, have reflected broader changes in the relationship between young people and qualifications. If for example, the Advanced GNVQ was originally designed to be the mainstay of a 'vocational pathway' designed to cool out a new generation of young people who, as a result of changes in labour market recruitment patterns were remaining in full-time education for much longer, it was also being used by individual students as a way of climbing up the education system and as an alternative route into higher education. As a result, rather than promoting vocational competence, the GNVQ, or rather its successor the VCE had experienced academic drift.

This section examines how a sample of GNVQ students have related to their courses and how they have perceived their educational careers. It argues that rather than being the passive recipients or the victims of educational policies, they have made active choices to continue their school careers. In other words they actively participate in the construction and negotiation of the learning divisions described in chapter 2. It shows how their decisions have been made in the context of changes in the employment opportunities for young people; 'staying on' – even continuing to

higher education is something that is worth doing if it will increase the chances of future economic security and is a way of ensuring a future that does not depend on Mcjobs and a life of casualised or semi-employment.

In investigating the issue of student choice and its relationship to educational structures, this section has used work by Willis (1977) to provide a theoretical grounding. However it also draws on work by Boudon (1973) and in particular, by Brown (1987). It argues that while the decision to stay on in education may be a pragmatic response to changes in employment opportunities, it is still a class response, a class reorientation to a changing economic climate. Though on the surface the *Inner London* students used in the case study may appear to have little in common with the 'the lads'- the white working class boys studied by Willis, the chapter concludes that there are continuities with both his and Brown's work.

The decision to undertake a qualitative study involving unstructured interviews and observation reflects the importance that those, like Willis, writing in the Gramscian tradition have given to the significance of cultural practices in the decision making process of students and as part of a critique of deterministic Marxism. These methods as Willis observes :

Are suited to record this level and have a sensitivity to meanings and values as well as an ability to represent and interpret symbolic articulations, practices and forms of cultural production. (Willis, 1977, p3).



If there is a weakness in Ainley's (1999) wider theoretical framework, it is that the question of agency is not pursued sufficiently and that issues about how students actively interpret and respond to the new conditions he describes are not fully developed. In other words, the issue of how students actively participate in or seek to renegotiate the constraints of a new settlement are not addressed.

Brown identifies the shortcomings of both Marxist and non-Marxist approaches where:

Schooling is understood in terms of the process of educational differentiation that represents little more than the translation of class inequalities into differences in educational attainment and the 'cooling out' of unrealistic expectations...Little attention is given to the consciousness and action of the pupils themselves (Brown, 1987, p17).

The material from the *Inner London* case study seeks to show that the students collective cultural practice continues to play an equally important role alongside external state structures or ideologies, in the shaping of student decisions to continue in full-time education. The chapter argues that even if the students in this case study draw very different conclusions about the importance of educational qualifications compared with those described by Willis, differences in student outcomes are the result of differences in historical circumstances and the extent of methodological continuity with Willis should not be underestimated.

However emphasising the importance of ‘active subjects’ the independence of student decision-making should not be at the expense of wider structures. As a result, the chapter rejects some of the more recent attempts at re-theorising the transition from school to work and higher education, which attempt to ‘individualise’ these choices. Thus the growth of the credentialised labour market described in chapter 1 and the reorganisation of post-16 education outlined in the chapters that follow, remain crucial in providing the background against which students make their decisions. The qualitative nature of this part of the research should be seen as complementary to the more quantitative material of parts one and two. It is designed to provide a greater insight.

### ***The Inner London case study***

The case studies have been comprised of Advanced GNVQ students in two large school sixth-forms between 1998 and 2000. The first of these and the one on which most of my attention has been focused, is located in North West London. In the chapter it is referred to as *Inner London* school. *Inner London* is a comprehensive school with a sixth-form that has continued to grow. At the time of the research it consisted of approximately 300 students. Well over half of these were following GNVQ courses at either Intermediate or Advanced level. The students in the study were on the GNVQ Business course and were the largest individual class in the sixth-form. Located in an area that was once an established London suburb, the intake of *Inner London* has changed significantly in the last fifteen years. All of the *Inner London* students in the

sample were black, Asian or from Eastern Europe. At least one of the students could be classified as having refugee status.

There were practical justifications for using the *Inner London* students as the main study. I was an established teacher at the school and the course tutor for GNVQ Advanced Business and thus had easy and immediate access to the twenty one students in the cohort. However there were also other reasons. In particular the educational careers of the *Inner London* students reflected many of the more general characteristics of GNVQ students outlined in the previous chapters. For example, rather than having plans for specific employment after their course finished, it was clear from my existing knowledge of the students that almost all were intending to use their GNVQ as an entrance qualification for a local, (post-1992) university.

### **A teacher and a researcher**

During the period in which the data was collected (spring 1999 to summer 2000), I was Head of Business Studies at *Inner London*. As a result I taught these students for several hours a week. Data was collected through interviews and questionnaires, examples of which have been included in appendix four. Students completed questionnaires and took part in taped group discussions towards the end of their first year. In these sessions the students provided information about why they had started the course, whether they had part-time employment and what they wanted to do in the future. Even though, I had briefed the students about my research proposals and explained the role that they would be playing, this exercise was also designed to

count as one of the group work tasks required for a key skills requirements on the course, proving a highly effective way of combining the role of teacher and researcher.

The questionnaires had previously been piloted on a group of second year *Inner London* business students. During this exercise, some of these students had had difficulties participating in individual taped interviews and as a result, I decided to use more of a group work approach with the research sample. The students then took part in taped interviews in November 1999, a period when they were completing UCAS forms. These sessions took place in an adjacent classroom. The interviews tried to put choices students made about their course in a wider context of future employment and higher education goals, their current situations in relation to their part time work and their friends. Finally, the students completed another questionnaire and were interviewed individually during May 2000, about a month before the course ended and before they knew their final results. These were open-ended interviews in which the students were encouraged to talk about their plans for the future, review what they had done and the skills they had learnt and to provide an update on their current employment.

Because of the problems experienced in the pilot, three or four students were interviewed in one session and as they were listening to each other, I could also bring another student into the conversation. Sometimes other students would intervene in the conversation themselves, providing additional information and the interview would become a group discussion. This not only made the process much

less formal in the eyes of the students but was also an extremely effective way of helping students develop points or pursue particular issues.

On many other occasions, the division between teaching and research continued to be artificial. For example, I was able to keep a diary of particular discussions and incidents both inside and outside the classroom during the closing months of their course. The diary included notes on discussions that I had had with students, but also discussions that I had listened to. Although there were parts of the course that necessitated 'formal' teaching (particularly the business finance and accounting sections), students spent a lot of time working on assignments together (the 'independent learning' in GNVQ) and chatting!

Data was also collected through other channels, particularly in relation to the higher education experiences of the *Inner London* students. For example, after leaving school a number of the students returned to school to collect coursework or sought help with initial assignments for their HE courses. Sometimes, ex-students were spotted in the street or younger brothers and sisters who were still at the school, provided details about what they were doing.

The students themselves were also valuable sources of information about each other and there have been examples where friends have been able to provide useful information to supplement what the students from the sample may have reported to me. In a few cases contacts have provided different versions of what has been happening to their friends. Examples of these are included in the chapter. Postal requests for information were always less successful, as were telephone calls to

student homes. However most of the students were contactable on mobile phones even if they did change their numbers rather frequently.

### **Methodological issues from *Inner London***

Did 'being the teacher' compromise the objectivity and detachment of the researcher? Willis for example, did not teach at Hammertown, his case study school and when not interviewing students, attended different subject classes 'as a member of the class' (Willis, 1977, p.5).

I would argue that being employed at the school enabled me to access data, and in the case of the first, coursework related interviews, to carry out activities that would be generally unavailable to others restricted to relatively short periods of research in schools and colleges, or even to those able to practice participation and observation on the scale of Willis. The advantages of being employed at a school in which the research is being carried out have also been noted by Shilling (1988). Unlike Shilling, who worked as a supply teacher I was already a well-established member of the teaching staff having worked in the school for several years. I would argue that this and the fact that the students were older and were remaining at school voluntarily, also enabled me to enjoy a more mature relationship with learners than Shilling was able to do. I always made it clear to the *Inner London* students used in the case study that the responses they gave in questionnaires or in interviews, would have no bearing on the outcome of their course or on my professional judgement about the standard of their work.

However I accept that being a teacher at the school and more specifically, being responsible for the course as a whole – in particular, overseeing the large amount of internal assessment and deciding on the students final grades, could have affected the responses that some students gave to certain questions and increased the extent to which I was able to ‘prompt’ or guide student responses.

As the data in this chapter illustrates, despite their individual commitment to completing their course, these students should not be classified as ‘school conformists’. Many of them had been cynical and disappointed about things that have happened to them at school. They had also been aware that I remained highly critical of aspects of the GNVQ and also of the extremely exhaustive process of applying for higher education. As a result I would suggest that they were able to be far more relaxed with me than with an ‘outsider’ making fleeting visits to their school in a semi-official capacity. As will be evident there were also many occasions where as a result of being present in the classroom I was able to document ‘natural’ discussions.

In many ways, the approach adopted has represented an advanced form of participant observation, particularly as it has also been conducted over a prolonged period of time. Following Mills (1959), I would argue that rather than compromising social scientific principles, the incorporation of the ‘every day’ experiences of the researcher into their intellectual activity strengthens their work. In my particular case, it has also been an extremely cost effective method for a part-time research student on a limited budget. Examples of questionnaires, interview schedules and fieldwork have also been included as appendices.

## **A comparative dimension**

### **The *Anglia* study.**

The other group of students that have been referred to in chapter 7 and chapter 8, were members of a large sixth form in Norwich. They and their school are referred to as *Anglia*. The *Anglia* students were following an Advanced GNVQ course in Health and Social Care. The choice of these students was partly due to practical convenience. An ex-colleague of mine was now employed at this school, teaching A-level Psychology and Advanced GNVQ Health and Social Care. He was also about to embark on his own research, understood what I was doing and was therefore both sympathetic and supportive to me. His excellent relationship with the students also ensured that they made me welcome. The *Anglia* students were used because being white and exclusively female, they were very different to *Inner London*. The two sets of students also had different family structures with many *Inner London* students in particular being part of very large local extended families. The different labour market opportunities in the two areas were also significant and have been addressed in the chapter. Finally the situation of the *Anglia* students, proved to be different to the *Inner London* students in other respects. At the time East Anglia had one of the lowest rates of progression from school/ college to university in the country.

The prime purpose of the *Anglia* student sample has been to provide a comparative dimension to the *Inner London* students. The importance of providing a comparative dimension to the main study is recognised by both Willis (1977, p.5) and by Brown (1987, p.7).



In the *Anglia* sample I relied on the more conventional research methods of recorded interviews and semi structured questionnaires. Though having professional contacts with the school over a period of time,<sup>72</sup> I only met the Anglia students on four occasions and did not get to know the students in the way that I have at *Inner London*. The nature of the data collected is therefore far more limited. The students completed questionnaires and participated in tape group discussions towards the end of their course. As had been the case in *Inner London*, the students were interviewed separately and completed a further questionnaire a month before the end of their course. These activities took place in the small room next to their classroom.

### **A-level students**

Like Willis and Brown, I have also collected data from students on different courses of study in the same institutions. In my case I have compared the GNVQ students with A-level students. The evidence collected from these was used to support more general arguments about the differences between vocational students and those who were following more traditional programmes of study. But it was also used to explore some the differences between students in *Inner London* and *Anglia* as a whole.

In both *Inner-London* and *Anglia*, the groups of A-level students completed questionnaires towards the end of their first year and towards the end of their final year, before they were due to go on study leave. I was able to keep the data collection process in *Inner London* relatively informal as I taught the students A-level Economics for two hours per week and in the case of two students also acted as their

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<sup>72</sup> In the summer of 2000, after the research had been completed I also accompanied both the Anglia and Inner London students on an end of year social trip to Yarmouth.

form tutor. As with the GNVQ students I was also able to talk to the *Inner London* A-level students about the nature of my research

In Anglia, however, the questionnaire completion took place during breaks between A-level Psychology lessons, though students were still helpful, interested and extremely comprehensive in their contributions.

### **Why did students choose to stay on at school?**

The earlier studies by Finn, Willis and Moore for example, have concentrated primarily on 'reluctant stayers,' working class students having to face an extra year of compulsory schooling because of changes in the school leaving age or coerced on to youth training schemes in the absence of work. The new generation of sixth formers cannot be seen in the same way. None of them were faced a statutory requirement to remain in school. They were free to leave full-time education and, as the evidence will show, some students agonised over whether they should. Neither were there any immediate financial benefits to be gained from staying at school. (These students predate the means tested *Educational Maintenance Allowance* now paid to many sixth-formers by government).

In deciding to continue with their education, the students had also made conscious decisions to continue to study at school. They could have decided to transfer to Further Education colleges instead, if they so wished. At *Inner London* for example, there were three or four FE colleges within easy travelling distance, while in *Anglia* there was a large college a short walk away. Likewise, despite the 'recruiter'

pressures faced by sixth forms like *Inner London*, there was no legal requirement on the school to admit any of them into the sixth form.

The responses of the *Inner London* sample reflected the changes in the occupational structure and labour market conditions outlined in chapter 2. As the table below illustrates, the students put a combination of career and employment related motives at or near the top of their reasons for staying on at school. The findings below, coincide with those of more comprehensive studies (FEDA/Sussex Careers 1998) in which 98% of those surveyed identified ‘aim to find work in this or similar occupation’ as a reason for continuing (66% saying that doing a GNVQ would lead to higher education) and also, with those of Abbott (1997) based on a survey in two schools.

Main reasons for starting the Advanced GNVQ at <i>Inner London</i> *	
	Inner London (20)
I'm interested in a particular career and this Course teaches me things that will be useful	17
I did an intermediate in this subject and it seemed 'normal' to continue to Advanced level	13
I didn't have the right qualifications to do another one	6
* Students were given 7 statements, the above are based on 'top three'	

However recognising that future career prospects are integral to staying on at school did not mean that students were able to identify any particular aspect of the business course that would be useful in the future. Many thought that a major reason for doing the course would be that it would get them 'better qualified.'

I want a job in business. The course will improve my chances of getting a job because I will be trained and educated (Dilip).

In some cases, the significance of obtaining more qualifications could be better explained in terms of jobs that they wanted to avoid like:

Working, standing up all the time...getting a job as a cashier, working in the council... or being a shopkeeper, you don't need a degree to be a shopkeeper (Soniya)

The adoption of a pragmatic and instrumental approach to their studies was also reflected in a general detachment from other sixth activities where there was a reluctance to participate in anything that was not either a compulsory requirement, or was directly relevant to passing their course. Even though several students said they had attended some of the various sixth form social events that took place during the year, there was generally little interest in and sometimes little awareness of any of the activities carried out by the sixth form council, for example:

I don't pay much attention to it (the sixth form council) because they don't make it sound important. A small group join it together (Preeti).

It's not interesting I don't know what's going on...(Abdi)

## **Instrumentalism**

In reviewing the skills they had developed and the knowledge they had gained when they were interviewed towards the end of their course, students said that they felt they had become 'more confident' (Pritesh, Amish), or that some of the things they had learnt would be useful for a future career, for example, 'communication skills' or 'how to run a business.' But after giving this question considerable thought Sunil, who was being offered a permanent job at Sainsbury's on the basis of performance in his current employment was able to say no more than that he 'would be able to apply some of the things from this course.' This discussion with Amish illustrates the difficulties that students had in making direct reference to how the course had helped them.

**MA** Tell me about the skills that you think you have learnt from this course.

What sorts of things are going to help you?

**Amish** It's helped me with my communication ....

**MA**, Which bit in particular?

**Amish** (pause) ...My speaking and my writing

**MA** What about the content of any unit?

**Amish** Well er unit 2 cos that involved IT and I'm going to work in IT and it combined business and IT...

Others simply made references to how some of theoretical concepts that they had learnt during their course 'might' help them in a career in business. Thus for Abdi,

knowing about the 'marketing mix' (the assignment work that the students were completing at the time), would be useful in a future job.

The instrumentalism, which these particular students bring to their studies, has much in common with Bloomer's critique of learning in GNVQ referred to in chapter three. Bloomer (1998) argues that there is a major difference between the official version about how learning should take place and how it actually does. Bloomer suggests that, even if students spend a large amount of time working 'independently,' in the sense that they may be working by themselves or with friends, this should not be interpreted to imply that they really were becoming the 'independent learners' that GNVQ course manuals encouraged. Like Avis, in his earlier critique of the CPVE, (Avis et al 1991), Bloomer sees the GNVQ as providing little to challenge a student's everyday experiences of school. GNVQ are just as likely to rely heavily on textbooks and a high level of teacher input.

However, if it is the case that students have an instrumental approach to their studies, then on the contrary, it might be in their immediate interests to find that in the words of one of Bloomer's sample:

...It's a brilliant text book-it covers everything in really good detail.... (Bloomer p170). <sup>1998</sup>

While 'being told what to do' or knowing that it is 'all in the textbook' may represent the antithesis of progressivism and reflect the alienation of students from the learning process, these comments are perfectly consistent with an instrumental approach to

learning, in which education remains a means to an end and where the aim is to complete the qualification with the minimum of difficulty.

As a result, I would argue that if the high level of teacher input into GNVQ learning described by Bloomer is a general practice, then this could be a problem when students transfer to university. For several of the sample and for one student Bhumika, who had completed the course previous year and moved on to Greenwich University and who had just finished her first year there, studying at university was a much more demanding activity.

When doing the GNVQ course you had a lot of time from teachers, but at uni you have to do most of the work yourself.

(Pritesh, Nov 2000)

It's more harder than school. Some of the GNVQ teachers just go through things step by step, so you don't really need to know how to find out.

(Bhumika, Oct 2000)

### **Individual choices or class repositioning?**

As has been noted, many of the earlier studies of working class school students have concentrated on their opposition to education. Thus Willis, contrasts the opposition of 'the lads,' to that of the 'ear oles'— a group of school conformists. However, the adoption of a conformist/non-conformist dichotomy can prevent us from explaining

the 'instrumentalism' that this new generation of students bring to their courses. I would argue that more and more students who are faced with an uncertain labour market have to re-orientate themselves to education and decide to remain in the sixth form to gain more qualifications are now adopting an instrumental approach.

As an alternative to a 'technical rationalist' model of educational decision making which assumes that student progress can be charted in terms of a production line, being completed stage by stage, helped by official careers guidance, Hodkinson (*Avis et al* 1996, p124,) emphasises the importance of investigating the complexities of individual student learning careers and how they can be influenced by a variety of factors. But ironically it is in some of the accounts that want to emphasise the importance of human agency, that the concept of 'choice' can be the most problematic.

Perhaps the clearest attempt to relate the outcomes of individual choices to a variety of factors, such as race, gender and leisure interests rather than class re composition is the work of Ball, Maguire and Macrae (1999; 2000). Ball and his colleagues imply that it is middle-class students wanting to do A-levels who prepare well for post-16 transition and are able to consider a wide range of options, visiting a number of colleges before making their choice. This group are described as 'active choosers' and can in turn be contrasted with groups of what are described as 'pragmatic acceptors' and 'notional acceptors' whose 'imagined futures' are 'vague, relatively unstable and beset with uncertainties'. There are also 'hangers in', a group of low achievers who are unable to articulate a future career path.



Ball and his colleagues attack the effect of the market competition on post-16 institutions. The authors are correct to emphasise that the current system of provision needs reforming if the relative chances of working class students in particular are to improve, yet classifying students as 'winners' or 'losers' or merely highlighting as the authors do, the importance of cultural capital in influencing the ability of the individual to make choices, ignores the collective and cultural aspects of educational decision making and denies any recognition that any decisions should be seen as being relative to the needs of those who make them.

In comparison, Boudon (1974), offers a useful framework for conceptualising the strategies of different groups of students towards the school. For Bourdon, rather than differences in educational performance being the direct consequence of the cultural deprivation experienced by lower status groups, they can reflect a situation where instead, groups of students actively assess the benefits to be obtained from continuing with school, then evaluate them in relation to the expected costs and risks that are likely to be incurred.

Boudon argues that people base their educational decision making on the position that they wish to achieve in terms of occupational placement and the 'social distance' that they need to travel in order to attain it. Despite their different theoretical perspective, Boudon's arguments about student decision-making can help to explain the 'drifting up' of the *Inner London* students. In relation to changes in employment possibilities, the student decisions to stay on in the school and to follow vocational courses are both strategic and 'rational'. More recently, Goldthorpe (1996) has sought to develop a more theoretical model of 'rational action theory' in which

decisions about education are made on the same basis as decisions about any other investment good. Thus according to Goldthorpe, people behave according to their interests, attempting to maximise the utility of their decisions.

Hatcher (1998), argues that rational action theory is an example of a 'methodological individualist' approach. However, he also recognises that there can be a range of working class orientations towards education. While the opposition and defiance of the pupils in the Willis study, can constitute one form of class response, Hatcher maintains that it is not the only type of response. This chapter argues that pragmatism and instrumentalism towards education can be just as significant. In this respect it is also important to recognise that even amongst the 'reluctant stayers' of the 1970s, attitudes towards school could sometimes be inconsistent. In Finn's (1987) sample for example, even though they continuing to be suspicious of both school and teachers, just over 70% of respondents gave a positive response to some aspects of the school's provision.

Like Hatcher, this chapter considers Brown's 1987 study to be a significant contribution to understanding working class responses to schooling. According to Brown:

Working class culture needs to be understood as a stock of commonly available cultural resources which people in the same class positions use in different ways to order their social conduct and to make sense of their changing histories and social situations (Brown, 1987, p.34)

### **Drifting up and 'getting on'**

Brown argues that previous studies have concentrated on the responses of minorities. Either they have focussed on a minority of working class students who accept the values of school, or those who are part of a non-conformist culture. Few studies have concerned themselves with the:

'Invisible majority' of ordinary working class pupils.... who neither left their names engraved on the school's honours boards, nor gouged them into the top of classroom desks (Brown, 1987, p1)

For Brown, 'ordinary kids' should not be seen as 'swots.' They do not openly reject the values of the school but neither can they be classified as conformist. Many pupils will fall somewhere between total acceptance and rejection. They may reject some aspects of the normative order of the school whilst accepting others. Thus, it may be more adequate to talk of the attitudes of such pupils in terms of indifference to the school (Brown, 1987, p48).

According to Brown, 'doing your bit' at school can be a strategy for 'getting on' and ensuring security within the working class, but it can also mean making sure that you have good workmates and reasonable working conditions. However, wanting to 'get on' should be treated differently to a desire for major social mobility and for 'getting out' into the middle class.

The historical context in which Brown's theory was developed is a significantly different one to that at the start of the twenty first century. In addition, the origins and

the community backgrounds of the students in his case study remain very different to those in *Inner London* and for that matter *Anglia*. Brown's main sample is made up of pupils following CSEs at 'Middleport' a South Wales comprehensive school in the early 1980s a period when, working class performance in public examinations still remained low compared with today's levels of attainment and where the changes to the occupational structure described in this thesis earlier were in their embryonic stages. However, in terms of the arguments in this thesis about the schooling, qualifications and the changing job market, then Brown's analysis is an extremely useful one.

### **'Getting on' in *Inner London***

I want something better than Sainsbury's ...something to be proud of....better position, better respect (Devang)

) I would suggest that there are strong parallels between Brown's 'ordinary kids' and their desire to become 'respectable working' and the GNVQ students in my sample who seek to avoid a life of 'Sainsbury's jobs.' The similarities are also visible in Soniya's earlier comments about avoiding the physically draining nature of low paid service work.

It was unskilled factory employment, that constituted 'real work' for Willis's students, it also represented a cross generational continuity as well as a reaffirmation

of the traditional masculinity associated with some types of post-war manual employment. In comparison, the low paid 'Sainsbury's jobs' in the service sector at the start of the twenty first century carry no such status. Neither does the fragmented and part-time nature of this type of employment lead to the shop floor collectivity and solidarity associated with more traditional employment. Devang's above remarks typify the anxieties of an 'ordinary kid' at the end of the twentieth century and justify his motivation for wanting to continue in higher education.

### **Getting on...being a manager**

Significantly, the desire to achieve a degree of respectability and security rather than having specific occupational and career ambitions, is reflected in the way that some students remained vague about their occupational aspirations and instead, made general comments about wanting 'a good job with good pay' or to be 'working for a big company.'

On a number of occasions during their UCAS discussions, several of the students identified 'getting on' with 'being a manager' and were looking to higher education as a way of ensuring this. Yet these aspirations must still be seen as being largely unformulated. (Even if Radwan, who worked as a sales assistant in a superstore eventually wanted to 'be a manager in the retail trade'). The clearest example of the significance of 'being a manager' can be seen in Vikesh's reasons for applying for university courses in 'business management' and at the same time, being determined to avoid those that had 'business administration' in their title.

**MA** Aren't these degrees very similar?

**Vikesh** No they lead to a secretary job or something.....

In Brown's study the future aspirations of the ordinary kid are 'at the centre of an educational crisis' (Brown, 1987, p1). As a result of the arrival of mass youth unemployment and 'training without jobs,' these youngsters are not able to carry on with the same certainties of before. For example, it could no longer be guaranteed that by continuing to 'do their bit,' their future could be made secure. In the concluding chapter I will argue that, a variety of contradictions continue to face today's new students.

### **Drifting up, but staying with your mates...and with your teachers**

In some studies of post-16 provision, the 'freedom' of being in an FE college has been contrasted with the custodial nature of school (Ainley & Bailey, 1997, chapter 5). However, I would argue that for many working class students staying on, their current school provides both the security and collective solidarity needed to secure educational qualifications. This is not to deny both the working class origins of FE colleges or that, as noted earlier; colleges continue to remain important 'second chance' institutions for many working class adults. While one or two of the *Inner London* case study students said they would rather be in college, the majority said they preferred being in school:

You know everyone here.... I know the teachers they're OK (Soniya)

A significant number also thought that further education colleges were 'a doss,' or that they were unable to provide the structure and discipline necessary for them to complete their courses. Some *Inner London* students had gone to college at the end of their Intermediate level course but Radwan, Abdi and Stran, all of whom had gone to FE College to enrol on an Advanced GNVQ course returned to school within a week or two.

Anish, who had left school at the start of Year 12, to start an NVQ 'in accounting' at a local FE college was to do the same. His fellow students did not seem surprised that he had returned. On the contrary, Anish's return caused much derision amongst the others.

### **Staying on at Anglia**

Similar attitudes to staying on were to emerge amongst the students on the Health & Social Care Advanced course at *Anglia* School.

**MA** Have you any regrets about staying on here?

No, I've been here since year 8. I did consider going to college after I'd done the Intermediate, but I thought all my friend are here. I don't know anyone at college. So I stayed with my friends.

(Rachel, completing her third and final year in the sixth form at *Anglia*)

Most students in both of the case study schools said they would miss the school, even if some said they would not miss particular teachers! The fact that the students had been on one course with the same classmates for two or three years had been significant, as Lisa from the *Anglia* sample recognise.

**MA**        what will you miss?

**Lisa**       all this lot... we're mates

**MA**        will you be keeping in touch?

**Lisa**       with most of them.....5 or 6 of them.

What is also significant about this conversation is the continued importance of a collective transition in the lives of the students.

### **Them and us**

Because they have an instrumental towards school, students remain critical of educational institutions and are aware, even if this does not represent a clear understanding of their role in selecting particular groups of students for particular courses and institutions. Thus, for Anjana, one of the most hard working of the students, inequalities within education were clear, in her comment that 'top universities always take A-levels much more than they take GNVQ.' That other students were aware of educational inequalities was confirmed by the fact



that, apart from Rajitha's law application referred to earlier, none of the *Inner London* students had considered applying to pre-1992 institutions. It was true that, as the table included above shows, only a small minority said that they had begun a GNVQ course because they did not have enough qualifications to begin another one; but the fact that students were not prepared to give this as a reason for beginning the GNVQ, should not be interpreted to mean that students were not aware that differences in status between qualifications did not exist. A large number of the Inner London GNVQ students for example, had progressed to Advanced level via Intermediate GNVQ, which effectively prevented them beginning A-level even if they had expressed an interest in doing so.

In comparison, A-level students at *Inner London* were likely to be more dismissive of vocational qualifications and aware of the inferior status given to GNVQ.

If you are doing GNVQs people assume you failed your GCSEs and are a bit thick.

(Navida *Inner London* wanting to study law)

I've never considered doing GNVQs, A-levels will give me further knowledge and more choice.

(Nisha *Inner London* wanting to study accountancy)

The A level students at *Inner London* were also clear that there were now 'good' and 'bad' universities, although their perceptions did not always coincide with the

divisions between post and pre-1992 institutions. One local new university, near to the school, had been the subject of considerable media attention as a result of disputes about 'dumbing down' and teaching standards. Students were aware of this and unlike those on the GNVQ, none of the sample intended to apply there. However, few of the A-level students, had any real knowledge about the historical elitism of higher education, a reflection of the fact that none had parents who had any experience of university either in this country or abroad.

Though *Inner London* school still had well over a hundred students following A-level courses, it draws from a highly localised and largely working class area. The A-levels that attracted the most students at Inner London were Maths and Science but the more 'vocational' A-levels such as Law and Economics drew comparatively large numbers. The school found it hard to recruit enough students to A-level humanities courses, although psychology was popular. Additionally, as a result of lack of student demand there were no A-levels currently running in Modern Foreign Languages. But A-level students who were aiming to study vocational subjects at university were clear about differences. Preeti, who wanted to do a business and finance courses at university explained the reasons for her choice of course at *Inner London*.

I considered studying GNVQ IT to gain knowledge about computers as I was hoping to do computer science but I later found that that the requirements are two A's and a B at A-level. Also GNVQ is not recognised very highly as an achievement.....I'm doing maths and economics and I chose English because it's an academic subject.

A weakness of Willis's (1977), arguments is the assertion that the school plays little or no part in the reproduction of class inequalities, that working class kids ignore official hierarchies of knowledge. For Brown, on the other hand, structural theories of reproduction should not be contrasted with cultural explanations. Educational differentiation should be seen as a two way process. This is evident in the following extract from Brown's critique of Willis:

The education system neither simply fails the working class, nor do the working class simply fail themselves...It is the moving encounter between identities and institutions which enables us to understand why the ordinary kids bother to make the effort in school. (Brown, 1987, p.5).

The choices that the *Inner London* students make about both their current and future courses is a strategic response to inequalities within education as well as to changes in employment possibilities. The next section of this chapter focuses on the higher education choices of the Inner London students.

#### **'Going to uni': *Inner London* students and higher education**

Hi sir, hope you u r ok. I'm at uni now...

(Text message from Soniya ex-*Inner London* student 20/9/2001)

The *Inner London* students made their applications to university during the first term of their second year. For many, this was an extremely arduous task and resulted in them missing their assignment deadlines, while they worked on their ‘personal statements,’ (according to their Head of Sixth Form, the part of their application on which universities would make their decisions about whether to accept them or not). The table below shows where the students applied, - their actual destinations are documented later.

The chosen destinations, all post-1992 universities are consistent with what has been argued in earlier chapters. However, what is also significant is the localised nature of their choices with all the locations in relatively easy travelling distance of *Inner London*.

Where the Inner London GNVQ students applied	
Westminster	14
Herts	13
North London	12
Brunel	11
Middlesex	11
London Guildhall	9
Thames Valley	7
Kingston	4
South Bank	3
East London	1
Greenwich	1
Westminster College	1

The following conversation about UCAS applications recorded at *Inner London* in November 1999 illuminates the students' approach to university applications.

**Soniya** I got my six unis...I'm gonna apply for 3 HNDs and 3 degrees

**MA** So why are you choosing these places (and Middlesex first)

**Soniya** Cos I'm doing business studies and they do business studies

**MA** But they all do business studies, there's lots of business studies courses.... Do you know anybody there?

**Soniya** I've got two cousins who go there and they say it's all right...cos the work they do is like what we do now.

Some students claimed to have read the prospectuses, or could at least be seen carrying them around, and there were others who (as Stran claimed), 'wanted to sit down and read them carefully so as not to do the wrong thing.' But the significance of friends and family as providers of information should not be discounted. Though Radwan admitted that he had only 'looked over' prospectuses, for others such as Devang the process of selecting universities had been 'a bit of both.' He had been looking at the prospectus but also talking to friends and relatives.

If 'staying with mates' in the sixth form, or following relatives and friends on to specific courses at particular universities reflected the importance of

collective power and of a reliance on collective cultural capital, it should also be seen as a defensive class response, an attempt to ensure that aspects of the new settlement are on their own terms. Thus, if the process of transition to university for *Inner London* students has been described as a comparatively routine and uninterrupted process, then attending university can still be a daunting prospect that cannot really be made sense of. For example:

- |                |  |
|----------------|--|
| <b>MA</b>      | Why have you put Hertfordshire first?                          |
| <b>Pritesh</b> | My cousins are there   |
| <b>MA</b>      | Everybody seems to have somebody there                         |
| <b>Soniya</b>  | Do you know what, last years from (Alperton) they're all there |
| <b>Pritesh</b> | Yes it's a really big university....                           |

But, unlike the predominately middle class students A-level students in the *Anglia* survey, living at home and studying at local universities was also about making the most effective use of limited economic resources. It was about deciding between what you can afford and what you cannot. It was about paying your way and not wanting to get into debt. Thus as Devang comments:

I wanna come back home after. Living away (from home) is a hassle but you need quite a bit of money and I want to save up.

### **A new kind of university student?**

The transition to university by the *Inner London* GNVQ students is a very different process to that generally associated with going on to university. The transition has

traditionally been a time when largely middle class sixth former students have reaffirmed their social independence. Even if, despite student the existence of student maintenance grants, they often remained economically dependent on parents, they invariably established a geographical independence. For example, a UCL representative, invited to speak to the *Inner London* Year 12 students later that year, recalled her own experiences.<sup>73</sup>

I couldn't get away from parents quick enough.... I didn't want to stay in London.

I wanted to get away from the smoke and the pollution....

For this cohort of students, the transition to semi adulthood was often reaffirmed by having a 'gap year' between school and college. This was seen to personally benefit young people in a number of ways. According to Stephanie Merrit in the *Observer Review* 20/8/00 for example:

A gap year should be compulsory for all right thinking young people about to go off to university. A gap year is for being bold, adventurous, wild...Gap years are also associated with 'travelling.'

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<sup>73</sup> Jane Gibbs 19/09/01

Of the 50,000 (one in five of all students) that she estimated were able to take a gap year before entering university, the article claimed that one in ten visit Central or South America and 14% of travellers visit the Far East. For Merritt:

The mere business of getting yourself to the other side of the world, not losing your passport or return ticket avoiding rapists or pickpockets.... will prepare you well for adult life

According to the Times Educational Supplement, many teachers were not doing enough to persuade some students planning to start university of the benefits to be obtained through taking a gap year (*TES 17/8/01*). This perception of school leavers who are about to become university students still remains powerful in terms of the public perception of students<sup>74</sup>. From the end of August through the beginning of October for example, national newspapers bombard young people about to start university with information on how to bridge the great divide, giving advice on leaving home, sharing a flat or opening a bank account. In addition, a range of specialist publications, that have grown up in response to an increasingly expanding student market also consolidate this image. In one publication, the experiences of a new student are described:

It was the big day. I'd packed up my beloved CD collection... The journey was endless. I was excited but absolutely knee-knocking.... I was a mummy's girl through and through. I couldn't even boil an egg, let alone iron a shirt! When

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<sup>74</sup> For example, the G2 section of *The Guardian* 30/09/99 began its diaried activities of a group of new students at Leeds Metropolitan University with a headline 'bad dancing and killer hangovers...the new arrivals are keen to begin their further education.'



we arrived I ran through my new home...It was beginning to dawn on me what my new-found freedom would mean. I could do whatever I liked.

Lisa Davies *You Can* magazine (1999)

In continuing her account of her first year at university she recalls:

Along with my independence came an urge to recreate myself. I used to be a smart blond who wouldn't be seen dead with a pint in her hand. By the second term I had bright red hair and my belly button pierced.

#### **From home to uni ...and then back home**

While going onto university is a significant landmark in the lives of the *Inner London* students, and something that many of them would not have expected to be able to do, it is a very different and less dramatic process compared with the experiences described above. The experiences of the *Inner London* students would suggest it should be seen as something that can be fitted around an existing life style rather than necessitating the construction of a new one. For example, the proportion of the week that is spent 'at uni' essentially replaced the time spent at school, (though as will be evident later this should not be taken to imply that the students didn't think it was more stressful). The *Inner London* students would go on to attend universities which were within travelling distance from their homes, but they continued to exhibit a sense of distance from the institution. This was intensified by the fact that several

students who went from the GNVQ Advanced Business to degree or HND courses at local universities reported that they had at least one day a week when they did not have to attend for lectures. In a number of cases attendance was confined to three days a week.

If the period of time required to attend lectures was less than had been required at school, then attendance generally resulted in much longer journeys. For example, a five-mile bus journey in traffic, a tube ride across London or (for Hans, Anish and Pritesh), a university 'shuttle' from the Thames Valley campus in Ealing to another in Slough. They had become student commuters.

I have not joined any social activities. I don't really know about them

(Kalpna Oct 2000)<sup>75</sup>

I don't stay at uni much unless I need to check my e-mails...it's too far

from my house. I'd rather leave early (Teni, Nov 2000).

I haven't joined any clubs, but I have got a SU card. I try to spend some time in uni, for example go (to) library, use e-mail. but I don't stay longer than 2 hours... its boring (Gayathiri, Dec 1999).

I have five hours of lectures for three days a week... Yes I do spend a lot of time at university when I have no lectures. Sit in a room and go over the work or seminar questions. I have not joined any clubs or societies. (Anjana Nov 2000)

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<sup>75</sup> Kalpna and Gayathiri were students from the previous year's group who were visiting the school

Attendance at university outside of the timetabled lecture/tutorial slots could be justified in terms of practical necessity.

I use the library for all my books. I have not joined any clubs and when not in lectures or using computers I go home (Premila, Nov. 1999).

I use the library and the IT centre to get information for my work I have to do and for programming using Delphi as I don't have this at home (Hans, Dec 2000).

#### **Education and Sainsbury's jobs.**

I'll keep my job so that I've got some money coming in if I want to spend it on books or something like that. I'm gonna try not to have to get a loan cos of the hassle to pay it back and everything and once you get the money in your hands it's more spending not in the right direction (Bhavin).

Another significant aspect of the *Inner London* student's settlement with higher education was the relationship between time spent studying and part-time employment. If, as has been suggested, young people continue in full-time education to avoid what have been described as 'Mcjobs,' then equally, they may be dependent on them to complete their studies. Traditionally, many teachers have seen part-time work as a potential interference to the progress of

sixth form students, especially to those studying A levels. (*TES* 5/6/98, *The Guardian*, 2/2/99). DfEE figures for 1996 however, showed that 62% of 16-17 year olds were working and that the number of part-time workers in the 16-18 age group now exceeded the number of this age group who were working full-time (Hodgson and Spours 1999). Rather than undermining any new educational settlement, the next section of this chapter argues that, on the contrary, student employment can make it more secure. Reflecting on their research findings from a large sample of young people in Gloucester, Spours and Hodgson were able to begin a double page spread in *The Guardian Education* supplement (04/07/00) with the observation that ‘Young people now finishing their A-levels have juggled more paid work with their studies than ever before.’ Spours and Hodgson argue that the increased cost of going on to higher education has also meant that the number of students seeking to gain places at local universities, where they can both live at home and continue with part-time employment, is likely to continue to increase significantly. I would argue that for particular groups of students the relationship between school and work is rather more complex. In students guidelines that accompanied *Curriculum 2000* material produced for schools, QCA provided the following advice.

- Most students have part-time work and some find it difficult to juggle the demands of study, leisure activities and work. It is important to think about your priorities - long term as well as short term. You can then make choices about how you spend your time knowing the reasons for, and results of, your decision. Your school or college may have guidelines to help you, and your tutor should be aware of your commitments. In deciding how much work to commit yourself to, you might consider:
- how many hours to work (around 10 hours a week seems manageable for many students);
- when you work - holiday or weekend work may be easier to manage than evening work during the week;
- how you could use your experience of work, for example to link with vocational courses, to provide key skills evidence or to gain experience needed for a future career.

Some large colleges can organise their timetable so that students who rely on their earnings can have time to work during the week.

(QCA, schools mailing , 09/2000.

The conflicts and contradictions between study and work have also been addressed from a Neo-Marxist perspective by Rikowski (2000b). For Rikowski, the key conflict for the student-worker is between being a 'student' and being a 'worker,' where role expectations have to be managed, but can never finally be resolved. The role conflict caused by the rise of the student-worker can be severe (Rikowski 2000b, p200).

According to Rikowski, this is an expression of the wider structural contraction between the social production of labour power and its social reproduction. The drive to make students increasingly pay for the costs of the social production of their labour-power, by replacing student grants with loans and by introducing flat-rate tuition fees is, he argues, an expression of this; students have been forced to enter the labour market to ensure their own social reproduction.

Several of the *Inner London* GNVQ students about to move on to local higher education institutions, intended to rely on income from current employment income. Though all students, would be applying for student loans this would provide additional income as few, if any, expected parental financial help .

However, if the existence of student financial hardship amongst students cannot be disputed, it would also be wrong to suggest that all students are *only* working to finance their studies. I would argue that several of those students in the Inner London case study have already become established in the labour market and that they have semi permanent and contractual employment and see continuing in full-time education as a way of improving their relative position with educational qualifications allowing them to 'get on' and avoid depending on the sort of work they currently did.

Rikowski's approach is also problematic. Like the human capital theories of which he is critical, he assumes a simplistic relationship between education and the production process, having little to say about both the changing nature of the student population itself or about student aspirations.

In some respects Ainley's conception of 'education without jobs' is also an inappropriate title. Rather than being excluded from the labour market many of the new generation of students remain actively involved in it. The phrase 'education with part time employment' would be more accurate. However while this employment may take the form of 'Sainsbury's jobs' and be both casualised and temporary we should not underestimate the degree of continuity that exists for some students.

It is important to recognise how much employers, particularly in the service sector where the majority of the *Inner London* students had jobs, depend on this type of labour. Rikowski highlights the extent to which student employment has grown in particular sections of the retail trade, with Sainsbury's employing 30,000 students compared with only 6,000 in 1989, Tesco employing 16,000 - just over 10% of its total workforce, while Pizza Hut (60%), KwikSave (40%) and Waitrose (35%) have particularly high proportions of workers who are full-time students.

Companies like Sainsbury's are also operating 'transfer' schemes for those students who do move away from home. (Ahier & Moore 1999). Students in the case study gave some further examples of the existence of these. Even if they were not planning any major changes in location, moving from one branch of the store to another in the same area could also be an option.

If students assess qualifications like the GNVQ in terms of their exchange value, then for some the exchange value of forgoing a full time wage will continue to remain a difficult exchange. This was evident from a classroom conversation at the end of the penultimate term at *Inner London* and in which Rakhee, behind with her assignments and having failed most of the unit tests for the second time, was close to leaving her course to work for B&Q and qualify for a pay rise from £4-20 to £4-90 per hour for moving to 'admin work.' During the discussion she came under intense peer pressure to stay. According to Bhavin, one of the keenest to go to university and already in receipt of an offer, Rakhee would be 'staying in a crap job.' Going to university was now necessary to get a 'decent job'.

In the end Rakhee did decide to work for B&Q. She was the second student to leave school and take up their part-time job on full-time basis. At the start of the second year of the *Inner London* GNVQ course, another student Nadia, who had fallen behind with her work, had dropped out of school and had begun working full time with her part time employers, while a third (Sunil), spent a significant amount of time agonising over whether he should accept a supervisory/semi managerial job at the Sainsbury superstore where he and Devang were employed. The extent to which 'earning and learning' took place at *Inner London* is visible in the table below. Students' previous educational histories are also included. It was often difficult to establish the exact amount of hours that students worked, as the number of shifts were negotiated with supervisors on a weekly basis and all were paid hourly. However, working up to fifteen hours a week appeared to be the norm. Nadia said she sometimes worked over 20 hours and reported earning up to £400 per month.



From the case study evidence it is evident that the *Inner London* students are able to play an active part in constructing their own settlement. They seem 'settled' in that they are both able to mix education and Mcjobs. They have both limited and manageable objectives in terms of climbing up the education system and gaining access to higher education.

However, are they representative of students elsewhere? This chapter will examine the dangers of over emphasising the ability of students to control their learning careers in the way that some of the *Inner London* students were able. After comparing these students with others at *Anglia* school, it will suggest that the patterns of learning and earning and the 'mass' transition to higher education documented in the *Inner London* sample are less likely to be replicated so easily in other situations.

For example, in *Anglia*, those who did make the transition from school to university were those who used the traditional A-level rather than the vocational route. It will also argue that even if the majority of the *Inner London* students made a relatively untroubled transition into higher education, for a significant minority the transition was more precarious. The concluding chapter will then examine some of the wider contradictions and uncertainties of staying on in full time education at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

**Inner London students. Where they came from, where they worked.**

<b>Student</b>	<b>Parental background</b>	<b>Previous course</b>	<b>Employment 9/98- 7/2000</b>
Abdi	Father, Credit Manager in Middle East (Abdi came to Inner London from Somalia in 1995)	Intermediate GNVQ Business Inner London	Tesco (Watford) from mid 1999
Anjana	Father welder, mother chef. Moved to UK from Kenya 1995	Intermediate GNVQ Business Inner London	Cash & Carry receptionist 16 hours per week
Anish	Mother, food factory supervisor	Intermediate GNVQ Business Inner London	ASDA
Bhavin	Hygiene operative Moved from India to local primary school	Intermediate GNVQ Business Inner London	Cash & Carry weekend work school holidays
Devang (Bhavin's cousin)	Machine operator Moved from India	Intermediate GNVQ Business Inner London	Sainsbury evening shifts
Dilip	Father carpenter, mother homemaker	GCSEs Year 11 Inner London	Not working
Hans	'Managers'	Intermediate GNVQ Business Inner London	Agency work
Kuol	unclear Moved from Sudan in 1997 father still there	Intermediate GNVQ Science FE college Paddington	Agency work Briefly worked at Clarks Shoes -sacked
Nadia (left course in Sept 99)	unclear	Intermediate GNVQ Business Inner London	Sainsbury -evenings, weekends
Preeti	Father carpenter, mother factory worker	GCSEs Inner London Year 11	Clarks Shoes -evenings weekends
Pritesh	Mechanic	Intermediate Business Inner London	Cash & Carry Worker- evenings and weekends

Radwan	Mechanic (moved from Somalia early in secondary school)	Intermediate Business Inner London	TJMax from mid 1999 evenings
Rakhee (left course spring 2000)	Father telephone engineer mother primary school classroom assistant	Intermediate Business Inner London	B&Q sales clerk /cashier
Rajitha	Postal worker	Intermediate Business Inner London	IKEA June 1999
Sarika	Father ,carpenter mother factory worker	Intermediate Business Inner London	Safeways -checkout
Soniya	Sales Assistant Moved from India in 1992	Intermediate Business Inner London	Wickes -checkout
Stran	Father abroad –bank worker. Moved from Georgia early secondary school	Intermediate Business Inner London	Not working
Sunil	Builder	Intermediate Business Inner London	Sainsbury -checkout. Promoted to supervisor
Teni	Dry cleaner owners	Intermediate Business Inner London	Not working
Vikesh	Shopkeeper	GCSEs Inner London Year 11	Various jobs Macdonalds/ Wembley steward
Yin Yin	Takeaway Owners	Intermediate Business Inner London	Help with family business

## Chapter 7

### The limits to 'drifting up'

#### Inner London and Anglia. A comparison

The GNVQ students at *Inner London* School have a large number of post- 1992 universities in close proximity as well as a large variety of courses to choose from. This was not the case in East Anglia. Like their *Inner London* counterparts, a number of the *Anglia* students had progressed to their Advanced level course via an Intermediate GNVQ. However, the Advanced GNVQ Health and Social Care students who made up the Anglia sample were different to the Inner London students in a number of other ways. As the table on page 229 shows, they were from a wider range of occupational backgrounds and in many cases were much better qualified than the *Inner London* students. They also had much more specific occupational ambitions.

MA Where do you see yourself in ten years time?

I hope to be a social worker, married with my own home and car. With kids (Amy)

I'll be a self employed, fully qualified physiotherapist (Lisa)

Sometime in the next ten years I would like to live abroad and maybe teach in a developing country (Katie).

### **Anglia students and HE**

When they were initially contacted, most of the students had reported a desire to continue to higher education and hoped that this would become a reality. The city in which their school exists has an established university and as a result three students said they would try and seek admission to a course there. However like other 'selecting' universities it had no tradition of admitting students with vocational qualifications rather than A-levels. The entrance qualifications for its degree courses in the health and social care area for September 2000 were set out in A-level grades. On the UCAS website students applying to the university with a GNVQ were advised either that (for nursing) 'information is unavailable - refer to institution' or (for occupational therapy) 'GNVQ is considered on individual basis please refer to institution.'

In the group discussion towards the end of the first year of their course a number of them expressed an urge to move away from *Anglia*, an area which they considered 'boring' (Lisa) and that they identified higher education as a way of achieving this. However, in their individual replies they also assigned a high importance to staying with family and friends and also recognised the high cost that participating in higher education would have on their families. Their teacher also reported that the large

majority of them would most likely stay in the area and enter employment. When the students were resurveyed towards the end of their second year, nobody was definitely planning to go to higher education that September.

Lisa who, in the earlier discussion had said she wanted to go to London to study neurology and whom her teachers considered to be a 'distinction' student, now said that she would not be able to because she did not have Biology A-level and 'I can't do A-levels.' However a more general change in attitude could also be detected:

I did want to go to Uni in London. ...I've got too much here in Norwich now (her boyfriend). I want to get a full time job in insurance in July because I'm tired of having no money...well I'm good with numbers I've always liked the idea of insurance and it's sort of logical. It's there in your face rather than a 'could be this...could be that' sort of thing.

Going to university was still something that some students wanted to do and their course/ career interests and aspirations could be related to the course that they were completing. For example, Charlotte and Vicky now wanted to pursue occupational therapy and Felicity physiotherapy or midwifery. Academically they appeared well capable of this. According to their teachers these students were all 'distinction' students. However they talked of 'working for a year, to save some money' before going to university.

The three students now also said that they would want to 'go locally' and mentioned the university in their city. Vicky, who had previously said that she would

maybe have to stay in the area, 'because I can't afford to move away', was now more philosophical about the future.

**MA** You said that that you want to go to UEA?

**Vicky** Yes

**MA** The reason why I sound surprised is because when we I spoke to you last year you said that it was boring here and you'd like to move away. Why have things changed?

**Vicky** ...There seems to be more to stay for and less to go away for.

**MA** So there's not a lot of point in moving to London?

**Vicky** No, not really, not for me all my family and friends live round here so....

Only Katie, (a student with 10 GCSE pass grades) said that she was prepared to move away from her family. 'I like them but I've been with them too long'. However, her plans were vague and her perception of herself did not fit that of her teachers who expected she would have to return the following year to complete her coursework.

Six of the group did in fact go on to achieve distinctions. In July, about one month after the interviews, the school published the following data about the expected destinations of its year 13 students.



### Proposed destinations of Anglia students 20th July 2000

Student	GNVQ result	Planned destination
Emma	Merit	Derby University degree course in combined subjects
Kelly	did not complete	returning to <i>Anglia</i>
Lisa	Distinction	seeking employment
Amy	Distinction	employment in adult training centre
Katie*	did not complete	returning to <i>Anglia</i>
Lucy**	did not complete	returning to <i>Anglia</i>
Rachel	Distinction	seeking employment
Felicity	Distinction	year off - then university
Charlotte	Distinction	Year off- then university
Vicky	Distinction	year off- then university

\* Katie was the only student to actually return    \*\* not present at earlier interviews

### Working and studying in *Anglia*

There was also less evidence of the employment patterns visible in *Inner London* and a number of the group were not working at the time that they were completing their course. Amongst those who were, several of the students worked a similar number of hours to their London counterparts. But as the table below shows, they were involved in a greater variety of work and the organisations and businesses where they worked were generally smaller. Thus, it could be argued that, rather than being Mcjobs or Sainsbury's jobs, their employment work was closer to a traditional 'Saturday job.'



Equally significant was the fact that several students had taken on part-time employment specifically related to their vocational course, working as care assistants or in play centres and regarding this as a sort of work experience. (The school's own play centre/nursery was housed in the same block as the students' base room). In this respect, if students on courses like Health and Social Care were more decided about their career plans, then it was not surprising to find that the proportion going on to study their vocational area in higher education was smaller.

#### **Social and educational origins of the Anglia students**

<b>Student</b>	<b>Educational history</b>	<b>Family background</b>	<b>Current employment</b>
Emma	Intermed. GNVQ GCSEs	Mother Care Assistant	Tesco 3 evenings
Kelly	Intermed GNVQ GCSEs	Gas engineer/ cleaner	Catering assistant
Lisa	10 GCSEs	Farmer/ care worker	Fast food worker
Amy	Intermed GNVQ GCSEs	Accountant/ music librarian	Bakery/café (Saturday)
Katie	GCSEs at another school	Social Worker/ ed welfare officer	Play worker (holidays)
Rachel	Intermed GNVQ	Civil Engineer/ catering worker	Care Assistant
Felicity	GCSEs	Theatre technician/ cleaner	Telephone operator (Saturday)
Charlotte	Intermed GNVQ	Farmer	seeking work
Vicky	Intermed GNVQ	Landlords	not working

### A-level students at Anglia

Unlike their working class *Inner London* counterparts and also the Health and Social Care students, the A-level students at *Anglia* mostly originated from middle class backgrounds and bore more resemblance to the traditional sixth former referred to in chapter 5. Thus unlike at *Inner London*, the idea of moving away from their parents and becoming independent was seen as one of the key attractions of going to university. According to the students, this would mean they could:

Gain a new circle of friends, meet new people, a chance to be independent, fend for myself.

(Laura, studying Psychology, Human biology and Geography father a bank manager, mother a dental receptionist).

By May of her second year, Laura had a firm offer from Surrey University of 3 grades Cs to study nursing.

My parents will support me through uni and I may get extra money through working while studying. I'm planning to live in student accommodation in the first year but live out after that.

When they were re surveyed just before their A-levels several of the group had also decided on a traditional gap year.

I'm going travelling with a couple of friends and then applying for year 2001 (Grace).

I will be working for 5/6 months and then going to Australia for six months with my boyfriend. (Natalie, doing A-levels in French, Psychology and Philosophy of religion with offers from Aston, Leicester, Bradford and Leeds. Parents, a teacher and designer).

The main similarity between *Anglia* and the *Inner London* A-level students was that few, if any of these students had considered GNVQ. In fact, few knew much about it. Like their *Inner London* counterparts, those that did, considered that GNVQ would limit their choices, lacked status or would be too narrow.

I did not consider GNVQs, as they didn't seem to enable the things I wanted to do in future at university (Mary).

I thought employers would prefer A-levels (Lucy).

### **Drifting up, standing still or falling down: *Inner London* students July 2000**

Even if many of the class were able to progress to university smoothly, for some of the *Inner London* sample the transition from school to university was turning out to be a long and difficult experience. For example, one particular student, Koul had become bewildered by the UCAS process:

**MA** Koul where are you thinking of going now?

**Koul** Norwich

**MA** Why Norwich? You didn't want to go on the school trip we had there!<sup>4</sup>

(Howls of laughter from other students)

**Koul** I know some other guy from there and he said it's like all right.... I'm putting down an HND in Marketing.

**MA** Are you sure they do HNDs there? I don't think the University of East Anglia will.

**Koul** ...well they do..... I checked in the book!

During the rest of the conversation it emerged that Koul had met somebody on a bus who was a student at Norwich College. In the end he decided Middlesex would be his first choice. He sent his UCAS application, mostly handwritten, in on the closing day.

A group of about seven or eight students had completed their course by the end of June and with one or two exceptions had managed to achieve the grade they needed to enter university and the next stage of climbing the educational stairway. However, Koul was one of several who continued to attend school to try and complete outstanding assignment work. As these students approached the last week of term, it became clear that though they might have completed UCAS application forms and in some cases had even received offers (or would, when the 'clearing' process began,)

several had yet to seriously contemplate the transition. When the school year finally ended, a number were still not sure about their destinations.

Rather than continuing to university, one or two were now talking about full-time work instead. Stran was getting cold feet about going to London Guildhall, 'they keep sending me letters and it's too far' and was now considering trying to get into Middlesex – much nearer to his home and the preferred destination for some his friends – through clearing.

Soniya was unlikely to complete her unit tests, but thought she could get accepted on a Foundation course at the Brunel University Osterley campus, as her friend had done the year before. However, by the end of term she had still to make the necessary phone call. Radwan simply didn't know where he was going and was still awaiting the result of one unit test. Abdi had decided to take a full time job at a Tesco superstore although he continued to refer to his decision in terms of 'taking a year off.'

Anish who also had tests outstanding had left his part-time employment at ASDA and was working full time in 'an office in Hayes,' while Koul, still the vaguest of the students in terms of his future plans, was still awaiting the results of four unit tests. He was planning to leave his current employment in the Watford branch of Clark's shoes shop and proposing to 'look for a full time job over the summer.'

Vikesh, though able to pass all of the unit tests, had not been able to complete the large number of assignments that he had outstanding and it was not at all clear what he would do. Having very poor school attendance the possibility of him finishing them at home during the summer holidays was unlikely.

### **Going to uni...but only just**

By mid September however the majority of students had secured places. This including several of those who despite the summer re-sits had not been able to pass all of their outstanding unit tests and who the school would re enter in January. Anish, Hans and Pritesh, all with one test to pass were accepted, after a telephone call, onto an HND course in ICT at the Slough campus of Thames Valley University. There they met Nitech, a student from last year's course who had failed several of his first year modules and had to sit much of the year again. To get to Slough these students used the university shuttle bus from the Ealing campus, where 'all the facilities are' and where Hans and Pritesh had originally applied, as it was a relatively short bus ride from their homes. The three students planned to attend test revision sessions at school when they were not at university.

### **Back to school**

Koul had now handed in all his coursework but as he still had three tests to complete he 'rejoined' the school on an informal basis. He did not register as a student and was not allocated a tutor group. He planned to attend for revision sessions at specific times and to continue to pick-up casual labouring work through employment agencies.

### **Soniya's story....**

Though still having to re-sit two unit tests and still not officially having completed her Intermediate course, Soniya reported that she was planning to enrol on an HND course at North London where another of her friends had already been accepted. At the start of October she left the following voice mail message.

Everything's OK at Uni and stuff. They let me in, they didn't even ask me If I'd passed all my unit tests or nothing.

In early November she left another message saying that she was still at North London had 'full student ID' and was staying at a flat in Holloway, but returning to Wembley at weekends, continuing to work at Wickes Superstore.

### **.....and Radwan's**

The fortunes of Soniya who had been able to get in through getting lost in the huge bureaucracy surrounding admission processes need to be compared to the misfortunes of Radwan. With one unit test missing, Radwan has not been able to secure his place on a degree course at Middlesex though he admitted that he had 'not done much' about looking at alternatives. He planned to work at a budget superstore and to re-apply through UCAS the following year. Like Koul, he nominally rejoined the school for the test practice sessions.

### **Getting in, but dropping out**

In contrast to the students above, Abdi, Rajitha and Sarika had all enrolled at universities but had also very quickly dropped out. Rajitha, one of the most motivated and hard working of the students, with a Merit grade for her GNVQ as well as an AS level pass in Law, had withdrawn from her Business and Law degree at the University of Hertfordshire's Hatfield campus.

) I attended the enrolment day on 25<sup>th</sup> Sept...I was very happy with the university and it was a pleasant environment to be in...but having travelled a few times I realised how difficult it was to travel all the way from Wembley to Hatfield and there were so many delays at Kings Cross Station. I tried alternative routes through St Albans but that also took too long.

After withdrawing, Rajitha converted her part-time employment at IKEA to full-time, decided to buy a car and to apply to Hertfordshire again next year. Sarika had also only attended Hitchin College (on a University of Hertfordshire franchised HND) for a day or two. She also cited travelling difficulties. Sarika then enrolled on Soniya's course at North London, but rarely attended and dropped out.



### **One year later: Inner *London* students July 2001**

All of the students were contacted towards the end of the academic year. In the case of those who did not respond, their peers or younger brothers and sisters were useful sources of information about their progress, while on at least one occasion a student was able to be approached in the street. Several had remained in regular contact with the school. Below are some notes and comments on their situations.

**Devang** had completed his first year at Middlesex University and passed his exams. He continued to work at Sainsbury's during the year but planned to quit Sainsbury's where he had been there four years, 'but some people have been there for twenty five' and move on to John Lewes. **Bhavin** had also completed the first year and continued to work in the same job, increasing his hours during the summer break. **Sunil** had completed successfully, was also still working at Sainsbury's, but thinking of moving to Carphone Warehouse as a Retail Sales Consultant. **Teni** had completed successfully and was looking for an 'office job' **Anjana** was still at Middlesex and, like Bhavin, working in the same job. **Stran** said he had also finished the first year successfully although some of the others said that he had failed one exam. **Yin Yin** was still at Middlesex and **Dilip** had completed year one at South Bank. He now worked for Woolworths.

**Anish** had completed successfully. He had also started a 'permanent' job working as a clerk in a large doctor's practice. In other words he had not told them he intended to return to university at the end of September. Like **Pritesh** and **Hans** who had also completed the first year of the HND, he had also now passed the outstanding unit test and thus officially passed the GNVQ. His new employers, he assured me, would

assume he was joining them straight from the school It was fortunate that he had told me this because, I had been about to send a reference.

**Soniya** was still at North London and had passed all her exams. She told me she had ‘just decided to work hard’ and seemed more confident and purposeful She continued to return home at weekends and work at Wickes and would be working there full-time during the summer.

**Abdi** was not able to secure a student loan because of his limited period of residence in the UK was pursuing his own version of the ‘gap year’ and still working in Tesco. **Koul** had struggled to make the unit-test revision sessions. On the occasions that he had arrived in school he was usually late or claimed he was unable to find the room where the lesson was taking place. He had continued to work on an occasional basis although had also come in with application forms seeking references for a variety of jobs. In December, for example he had had an interview with a national mobile phone chain. Koul had been able to have three further attempts at the remaining tests (January, March and June sittings) and by the end of the year had managed to pass two of them. In the other he was sure :

...the computers made a mistake...like in the American President elections

This would probably be enough to get him a place on a university course. His father, back from Africa, had also contacted the school at the end of the year wanting to know about his performance.

After one failed attempt at retaking her test in January, Preeti decided not to continue. Students can still receive a ‘unit certificate’ showing the units they have completed, in her case fourteen out of fifteen. (I told her that only somebody with

knowledge of a GNVQ would be able to understand the difference). She was working as an apprentice hairdresser at a salon in Sudbury (the school sent students there regularly for work placements) and said she was also doing an NVQ on a college day release scheme.

**Sarika** had decided she would 'not do uni now' She was back at Safeways but was starting a job in a travel agents in Harrow soon. Yet Devang and Bhavin were to tell me that she 'didn't stay long' and returned to Safeway. (In early 2002 I received a request for a reference for admission to a Child Care HND course).

Nothing was heard of **Vikesh** until December 2000. He had been a rather quiet student with no particularly close friends in the group. His school attendance record was still poor. Vikesh came into school during the last but one week of the term to see if he could complete his missing assignments. He said he had been working in an office in Stanmore, but was leaving because they did not give him enough time off. He agreed to re-enrol at the start of the following term, but did not turn up and it proved impossible to contact him.

**Rakhi** was still working at the B&Q store round the corner from the school. She has had no contact with any of the others in the group and says she has 'no regrets' about dropping out. (According to her younger sister (April 2002) she had applied for a foundation/access nursing course at Middlesex, but was also working 'doing mortgages'). **Rajitha** started her course in Law and Business Administration in September 2001. She arrived at school in December of the following year and explained she was finding the course difficult and the travelling hard. She said she considering nursing at another university, but in the end, decided to stay put. She had

left IKEA and was now working at a Brent Cross store.

**Nadia** was still at Sainsbury's but on an early shift in the petrol station kiosk (she used to work in the bakery section). She worked at John Lewes at Brent Cross during the day. She said she was resigned to the fact that she had finished with education, or that she was too busy to think about it. She knew that 'Devang and that lot are doing ok in uni.'

### **Making it, by faking it.**

By mid September 2001 Koul was in receipt of two offers and decided to enrol at Middlesex on an economics and international politics degree, although it wasn't clear from our conversation whether they know he still had one test to pass. He arrived in school with written confirmation of the offer and reported that Radwan was 'doing induction down there today' and that Abdi was 'taking another year off' because he still hadn't decided whether to go or not. Later in the week Radwan reported that Abdi was starting a private computer course instead... and that Koul had been very late for his first lecture. Koul confirmed this the following Friday. The 83 bus had been very late; the lecture had been on micro economics and 'difference curves.' After this, some students had attempted to change their course. Radwan's problems were far from over, however. Having passed his GNVQ test as well as a numeracy exam set by Middlesex he received a letter of formal acceptance for a Marketing and Business Studies degree, but on September 24<sup>th</sup>, he had trouble enrolling and accessing his student loan. The university regulations stated that students must have

GCSE grade C pass in English and Radwan only had a grade E from 1997. By September 28<sup>th</sup> Radwan, despite a written complaint from the school about his treatment by Middlesex, had, like Soniya enrolled on an HND in business at North London. Looking through the students' UCAS applications it became apparent that two of the others who had been admitted to Middlesex, (Anjana and Sunil) did not have a grade C. Radwan told me Koul didn't really have a grade C either, but added that it was 'Anish who had been the biggest liar...'

**Conclusion: 'lads' 'ordinary kids' and *Inner London*.**

The aim of this chapter has been to emphasise the importance of class agency in the construction of a new educational settlement. In response to changes in the job market the *Inner London* students have made clear decisions to continue in full time education. For the individual students in the case study, the decision to remain in education is a utilitarian one (in this chapter it has been identified as an instrumental orientation). It was judged to be worthwhile because of its future exchange value in the labour market.

Brown is correct to criticise the limitations of the Willis study and to argue that those in Willis' study represent a small minority of working-class students. As has been noted, there are similarities between the *Inner London* students and those in Brown's 'ordinary kids.' However the *Inner London* students have made much more of a long-term commitment to staying on in education and these students are not 'in crisis' in the sense that Brown describes the ordinary kids. While orientation of the

*Inner London* students' towards school is still clearly instrumental, it can be seen as a much more of a longer term re orientation. They are also able to enjoy clear routes of progression from school to higher education.

While emphasising the limited nature of the *Inner London* study and recognising that its conclusions are no more than tentative, it is possible to locate the students at Hammertown (Willis), Middleport (Brown), and *Inner London* in an historical /linear framework of transition, in which each of the three groups of working class students can be regarded as snapshots reflecting more general changes in the relationship between young people and the labour market outlined in the earlier part of the thesis. The table below provides an outline of what this historical framework might look like.

'The lads' (Willis)	Opposition to school	Traditional labour Market  Leaving school at The earliest opportunity.  Collective transition to local industry  Continued significance of Manual employment in Informal self recruitment
'Ordinary kids' (Brown)	In crisis at school  Short term instrumentalism	Collapse of traditional routes Of transition  ' Training without jobs' (Finn)
<i>Inner London</i>	Established at school  Long term instrumentalism towards school	Credentialised labour market. Extended school education.  'Mass' higher education

If the chapter has documented the uncertain transition of a significant minority at *Inner London* then for the *Inner London* students who did make the transition there still remain wider uncertainties. As the concluding chapter will re-emphasise, attempts to secure a new settlement remain deeply contradictory and just as likely to pass into crisis as establish any long term stability.

## Conclusion

The first chapter of this thesis discussed the relationship between education and the economy. In particular; it examined the arguments about the rise of post-Fordism and whether this created the opportunity for a new correspondence between education and the economy. It concluded that post-Fordist arguments were generally flawed. However it also concluded that changes in employment patterns and in employment prospects had altered the relationship between young people and qualifications. The chapter argued that changes in both the occupational structure and in the processes of labour market recruitment, now meant that relatively high levels of qualifications were essential to secure reliable employment.

Rather than providing the potential for a new post-Fordist 'collective intelligence' the increased pursuit of credentials by young people has been a response to changes in labour market recruitment patterns and declining employment opportunities. For example, it was noted the CBI predict that for 80% of new jobs created, employers will look for people with level 2 (GCSE) qualifications or above. In a situation where well over half of 18 year olds now achieve 5 GCSE passes and where government hope that this will increase to over 60% by the end of the decade, rather than representing new skill requirements, these claims are as much a reflection of the increased level of qualifications that young people are now *expected* to have. Chapter 1 concluded with a reappraisal of Collins' 1979 arguments about the rise of



the 'credential society'. The chapter also discussed the significance of the differences in status between certain types of credentials, particularly between vocational and academic qualifications. In using Ainley's analysis of the new Learning State for example, chapter 2 went on to argue that as a result of the decline of traditional workplace divisions, the distinctions between vocational and academic learning reflected the increased importance of the state in both the certification process and in the separation of different categories of learners. This has been part of an attempt to create a new 'settlement' in education, particularly within post-16 and in higher education.

However, using different types of qualifications to divide learners resulted in tensions and contradictions within and between these different pathways. Part two of the thesis comprised a detailed study of the development of the GNVQ and of its successor the VCE. It argued that while the 'academic drift' of qualifications like the GNVQ and key skills, may be consistent with Collins' more general arguments about the uncertain status of vocational qualifications compared with academic ones, it was also a consequence of students using the Advanced level GNVQ to try and 'drift up' the education system. However, it was also argued that these changes have not been enough to ensure that vocational A-levels enjoy parity with GCE A-levels and that the opportunities for drifting up the educational system that VCE provided, remained limited and continued to conflict with the 'cooling out' function of vocational qualifications, putting further pressure on any new 'settlement' in post-16 education.

The contradictory nature of the new VCE has, the thesis also argued, been reflected in both lower rates of participation and lower pass rates. This has been

further evident in examination statistics for 2004 which show yet another fall in the total number of students taking the double VCE award, down from 43,807 to 39,045, even if this is counteracted by a small increase in entries for the VCE single (6 unit) award, up to 42,708 from 4,914. In comparison, the number of A-level entries has now reached over 750,000 emphasising the continued importance of academic qualifications in securing higher education and occupational placement and illustrating that the A-level is still regarded as the premier (or 'gold standard') qualification.

Rather than vocational education simply being a reflection of the economic base of society or passively reproducing student divisions, a more dynamic model of the education system has been projected. Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 argue that the evolving nature of vocational qualifications and the contradictions that they exhibit, is the product of social struggles. These chapters illustrate how different groups try to use the qualification to achieve different ends and how the state attempts to regulate these.

If the first two sections concentrated on providing a structural analysis of labour market changes and an historical overview of state formations and qualification change, the final section of the thesis has addressed questions of agency - how students themselves respond to these. It argues that the increased participation in education has also been accompanied by an instrumental approach to school and to gaining qualifications. But building on the work of Willis and particularly that of Brown, it argues that this represents a process of class repositioning and is a new

collective response by working class youth, to the changing nature of the labour market with its increased insecurities.

### **Shall I stay or shall I go?**

Yet as a result of the changes outlined in the first chapter and because of the fact that the increase in the amount of qualifications held by young people continues to outstrip increases in the level of technical skills needed for work, there can be no guarantee that future generations will choose to continue in full-time education, or at least, will not seriously question the value of doing so.

For example, though chapter 1 has argued that there has been an increase in the number of professional or managerial jobs that recruit on the basis of qualifications, it also questioned the extent to which the new employment opportunities of the future would necessarily be managerial or professional jobs. For example, it noted the continued growth of 'Mcjobs' - poorly paid and casualised employment at the bottom end of the service sector.

Section three showed that for the students at *Inner London* in particular, getting better qualified and going to university were now thought to be essential to get a 'good' job. It was also essential if they were to avoid depending on Mcjobs (or continuing with 'Sainsbury's jobs' as one of the students implicitly referred to their part-time employment). However, the continued existence of credential inflation, the depreciation in the value of what qualifications will secure, does not guarantee a secure future without Sainsbury's jobs.

Recently published DfES<sup>76</sup> figures, show that the proportion of those staying in full time education after 16 rose from 51.5% to 69.3% in the ten years to 1997 and had increased to 70.5% by the end of 1998 and to 72.8 % by 2002. Participation in full time education by 17 year olds had risen from to 58.2% in 1998. It had reached 59.1 %, at the end of 2002, having risen from 58.4% in 2001. Participation by 18 year olds stood at 37.2% at the end of 2002, having increased from 37.1% the previous year. If participation in full time education *and* training is included, the figures for 2002 are 86. 8% for 16 year olds, 78.3% for 17 year olds and 59.6% for 18 year olds. However, the most notable feature of the recent trends in attainment is the highest level of qualifications that people now hold. For example, according to the DfES, there has been a 6.5 % increase in the number of people with qualifications of level 3 or above since 1997. As a result, almost 52% of 19 year olds in England now have a qualification at this level. The differences in earning potential between level 2 and level 3 qualifications has also increased from 7% to 14% over the last 3 years, (60.8% of the working population are qualified to at least level 2, a 5.9% increase since 1997). However the study, conducted by the Learning and Skills Council, also shows that the projections for the period till 2012 predict little net change in student numbers. It argues that unlike the situation in the late 1980s and early 1990s, future participation figures are primarily a reflection of the demographic profile of this age group. They do not reflect a continuation of a ‘generational shift’ towards post-compulsory education. The increased participation rates in the late 1980s and early 90s were due to a special combination of forces

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<sup>76</sup> The highest level of qualification held by young people and adults: England 2003  
[www.dfes.gov.uk/statistics](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/statistics)

resulting from the introduction of GCSE qualifications in 1988, which led to improved attainment and staying on rates and the severe recession of the early 1990s which reduced the job opportunities available to young people with few qualifications. The report concludes that unless a similar set of phenomena are repeated 'securing participation beyond the current levels could be difficult'. These findings come at a time when government continues to encourage young people to remain in fulltime education. For example it has extended the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) - a means tested payment of up to £30 per week to all 16 year olds staying in full time education.<sup>77</sup>

If the main argument of section 2, is that the division of students into academic and vocational pathways will remain a constant feature of the education system and that even though vocational courses are used by many young people, to 'drift up' the education system, they are still primarily designed to 'cool out' students and to safeguard the status of academic qualifications, it has also been argued that the academic drift within vocational qualifications might result in the inaccessibility of the VCE to students and increase the predicament of future generations of students about whether to stay in full time education or whether to leave.

Chapter 6 doubted whether Mike Tomlinson's working group on the reform of 14-19 education would be able to significantly raise the status of vocational qualifications compared to academic ones. At best these divisions would be repackaged into a new diploma, the future currency of which would still remain uncertain. Tomlinson's final report has added detail to the diploma framework

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<sup>77</sup> students with parental incomes of under £19, 630 will receive basic payments of £30 per week. Under £24 030 -£20 and under £30 000 £10 per week.

outlined in his interim report and he has continued to maintain that the Diploma will subsume existing qualifications. However hours after the publication of his final report, Labour politicians moved quickly to stress that A-levels and GCSEs would still continue and a White Paper is now promised early in 2005.<sup>78</sup>

### **What price a degree?**

But what of those who not only do decide to stay in full-time education but also to progress through Advanced level qualifications to university? One of the limitations of the case study is that it has only been able to follow the students into their first year of university. However statistics show<sup>79</sup> that several of the universities that the *Inner London* students went on to attend, continued to have high rates of non-completion. At the University of North London for example, a university where Soniya, Radwan and Sarika gained a place, 38% of students had dropped out of courses that year, while overall, 49% failed to complete their degree courses. At Middlesex, the most popular venue for this group of Inner London students, the drop out rate remained at 22%. At Thames Valley University, attended by three of the students, statistics for the previous year suggested that at least one from Anish, Hans or Pritesh would not complete their course. Thus, it should be emphasised that even though the completion rate in British universities has, in the past been much higher than that elsewhere with almost 80% of students completing

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<sup>78</sup> The day after Tomlinson's final report, *The Guardian* (19/10/04) led with the headline 'Blair insists A-levels will stay in shake up' referring to a statement by the Prime Minister that A-levels and GCSEs would both continue

<sup>79</sup> BBC News Online's performance tables for social inclusion, completion rates and research efficiency for 175 universities and higher education colleges in the United Kingdom. (1999)

their courses, the differences in status between different universities is also being accompanied by major differences in completion rates between different types of institutions.

Despite the high non-completion rate at some post-1992 universities, higher education continues to remain an increasingly popular option, with UCAS reporting that 450, 147 people applied to UK universities and colleges for September 2004<sup>80</sup>. As part of the drive to meet government targets, UCAS has also continued to promote to applicants, the economic benefits of gaining a degree.<sup>81</sup>

Surveys also continue to show that in terms of future earnings potential those with degrees continue to benefit. According to the AGR Graduate Recruitment Survey 2004<sup>82</sup> for example, the majority of AGR employers, 59%, set their starting salaries between £17,500 and £22,500. However by the time they are between 25 and 29 years old the survey claims that 80% of graduates are in jobs that both use their skills and earn an average of £25,776. *The Guardian* Grad Facts survey (10/12/02) also revealed that over 60% of graduates still consider their degree has been worth the financial investment. DfES statistics show that at the end of 2002, those with level 4 (graduate level) qualifications enjoyed a 46% gross hourly wage differential over those with level 3 (Advanced level qualification). According to Aston and Bekhradnia (2003), for example, the economy will continue to require an increase in the number of graduates. They argue that there will remain a broad balance between the supply of and the demand for graduates until the end of the decade and returns to graduates will remain significant. However, Aston and Bekhradnia also argue that

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<sup>80</sup> UCAS press release ([wwwucas.com](http://wwwucas.com) 15/07/04)

<sup>81</sup> UCAS *The value of higher education*. An online pamphlet for students June 2004.

<sup>82</sup> [www.prospect.ac.uk](http://www.prospect.ac.uk)

because the assumption is made by employers that graduates represent the top end of the population cohort in terms of skills and ability, the higher the participation rate, the fewer the opportunities for non-graduates. As the participation rate increases, it becomes rational for an increasing number of people to enter higher education in order to ensure access to the jobs they wish to apply for (Aston and Bekhradnia, p3).

The extent to which Britain has become a credential society is reflected in the fact that Britain has now overtaken the United States of America in terms of the proportion of graduates that it produces.<sup>83</sup> While the call by the infamous ex-OFSTED head Chris Woodhead and Ruth Lea of the Institute of Directors, for students to reject “low quality” university courses in favour of a career in plumbing (*TES* 30/01/04), may be no more than a crass attempt by educational right-wingers to intervene in the arguments over tuition fees, the question of whether the benefits of staying in the education system beyond the compulsory leaving age and going on to get a degree are outweighed by the cost incurred, will continue to be an issue for those who are able to progress to higher education. According to Brynin, (*TES* 23/01/04),<sup>84</sup> Britain’s graduate labour market is already overcrowded. Brynin argues that the gap between male graduates and non-graduates is growing narrower, particularly for those working in fields where a high proportion of employees are graduates, where as the number of graduates rises, the wages of graduates can fall by as much as £2.30 per hour. For Chevalier and Conlon,<sup>85</sup> the type of institution attended has a significant affect on future returns. In 1995 for example, graduates from former -polytechnics suffered a 7.7% earnings penalty compared with degree

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<sup>83</sup> *The Guardian* 17/05/02 Britain tops US in degree league

<sup>84</sup> ‘Weigh up degrees of risk’ Fran Adams *TES* 23/01/04

<sup>85</sup> Does it pay to attend a prestigious university? [www.ccc.lse.ac.uk](http://www.ccc.lse.ac.uk)



holders from pre-1992 universities. Graduates from leading Russell Group universities will, they argue expect to earn around £5000 a year more than their counterparts from former polytechnics.

### **Fees and loans. The increasing cost of higher education**

The debate about whether students will consider it worthwhile to attend university has become further intensified as a result of government policy on university tuition fees. The *Inner London* students who moved on to university were the first students to be faced with paying flat rate tuition fees of approximately £1000. In their questionnaire replies and in their interviews, none of them had favourable comments about tuition fees or the student loans they could apply for. Yet when asked whether the introduction of fees had made them think twice, the answer continued to be either a resounding 'no' - or alternatively a 'yes, but I think I will manage' response (Soniya). A number of these students would be eligible for exemptions from fees, because of low parental incomes. Remarkably, one or two were not able to answer the question, claiming that they did not know enough about the new fees. While there has continued to be concern about the level of debt that students will be faced with after they graduate<sup>86</sup>, opposition to these proposals has

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<sup>86</sup> According to Barclays Bank for example, those who graduated in 2001, the first cohort faced with having to pay tuition fees, will have had average debts of £10,000 despite the record number of students who now undertake paid work during term time.

also focussed on the danger of a 'two tier' university system, made up of those universities charging the full fee and those that do not<sup>87</sup>.

Though, as a result of recent changes,<sup>88</sup> students will not have to begin paying back the fees until they graduate and reach a certain level of income, this starts at a relatively low level of £15 000, well below the figure provided earlier as an example of a graduate starting salary. For current *Inner London* students Iram and Visopriya<sup>89</sup>, having to pay fees like this was an intimidating prospect, but they insisted it would still 'make no difference' in their determination to go. However in the future, how much difference will the end of free higher education make and to whom? As the students worked through a previous key skills level 2 Communication test paper, - they needed to complete key skills because neither had a GCSE at grade C, in English or Maths - we talked about how 'ordinary jobs' now needed more and more qualifications and whether this would eventually put people off.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Although the arguments contained in this thesis would suggest that the UK higher education system is already stratified and according to a *Guardian* survey (13/01/04), three quarters of all universities are proposing to charge the full amount). The same article quotes the Vice Chancellor of Middlesex University, as claiming that Middlesex will be forced to charge the full amount for reasons of economic survival.

<sup>88</sup> The 2004 Higher Education Act has changed the situation further. It allows universities to charge 'top up' fees of up to £3000 but abolishes upfront payments, instead requiring graduates to start paying back their interest free loans when they are earning. It has also introduced a new maintenance grant of up to £2700 a year which government claim will benefit between 50-55% of all full time students.

<sup>89</sup> Year 13 students in a key skills Communication class Inner London February 2004

<sup>90</sup> According to DfES figures published by the *Evening Standard* 31/08/04 most London boroughs recorded a small decrease in the number of school leavers accepted for higher education in 2003. However as these figures do not allow for delayed entry and a 'gap year' so any conclusions should be tentative.

As for new Foundation degrees referred to earlier, neither of the students said that they had heard of them. According to Kingston (*Guardian Education* 07/10/04), recent figures show that in 2002, 12,400 people were taking Foundation degrees, where as the number of those on HND courses rose for the fifth consecutive year to 79, 589. He notes that a Commons Select Committee has urged the Government to take no action on the phasing out of HNDs if there is still public demand for them. As a result, even though the BTEC awarding body has announced the creation of 85 different foundation degree titles, it continues to promote and seek accreditation for HNDs in 24 different vocational areas. As with the other vocational alternatives described in this thesis the future of Foundation degrees may be equally uncertain.

### **What should education be for?**

This thesis has been concerned with the changing relationship between young people and qualifications, particularly 'vocational' qualifications. Addressing the question 'Does Education Matter?,' Alison Wolf concludes that, for individuals, it matters more than ever before.

Having the right qualifications, in the right subjects, from the right institutions is of ever growing importance. Fewer and fewer jobs and opportunities are open to those who are denied, or reject formal

education; and, for the young, long periods in school and university increasingly appear not as an option, but as pretty much necessary.

(Wolf, 2004, p 244)

But what *should* education be for? Wolf also asks whether education matters in the way in which governments believe it does and if it does, whether these governments' education policies are accordingly well conceived? She concludes the answer is indisputably no.

) Wolf is correct to draw attention to this disparity. This thesis has argued that rather than education now having the opportunities to create the range of new and humanly fulfilling skills perceived to be necessary by a post-Fordist society, - a new 'collective intelligence' - learning has become an instrumental activity and an activity where the meaning of what is learned continues to be subordinate to its exchange value as a credential. The aim of learning for the majority of the *Inner London* students is to pass the course, enter university and then be able to complete the exercise again. This requires learning what is necessary, when it is necessary.

) If many practitioners have never regarded the intrinsic purpose of education to be the servant of the economy (Dale *et al*, 1990 p25) then neither would they be happy with the conclusion that for most young people education is no more than a consumer good. But if there is little evidence of post-Fordist claims about the liberating potential of a new correspondence between education and the economy, this should not be taken to imply that education cannot be a fulfilling, worthwhile and enjoyable activity, or even that it cannot contribute to a new collective intelligence.

Apart from making some passing comments about the responsibility of government to 'provide their citizens with good basic education,' (p256), Wolf is reluctant to address the possibility of constructing an alternative agenda. On the contrary, she appears to remain dismissive of attempts to do so. Before beginning this research project and as part of a series of conferences organised to try and influence the direction of the education policy of a future Labour Government, I was part of a collective attempt to publish a post-16 campaigning statement entitled *Towards real lifelong learning*. Unlike the various initiatives that have been referred to in this thesis, the IPPR's *British Baccalaureate*, Dearing, *Curriculum 2000* and now Tomlinson, this document (see appendix 5), not only calls for a new conception of the way that learning takes place, but also argues that radical changes at the level of curriculum organisation and in the structure of qualifications, must be accompanied by radical changes at the level of structural provision. It addresses issues of funding and democratisation of learning - issues of educational change on a much broader scale.<sup>91</sup>

### **What to do about Monday morning?**

But if alternative programmes must remain at the centre of any alternative education politics, their existence does not excuse practitioners from dealing with what Paul Willis describes as the 'Monday morning problem.' As Willis argues, practitioners wanting to fight for an alternative have to fight on *two* levels and in particular to recognise that to:

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<sup>91</sup> Also see the Hillcole group's *Rethinking Education and Democracy* (1997).

Contract out of the messy business of day-to-day problems is to deny the active, contested nature of social and cultural reproduction.

(Willis, 1977, p186)

As Woodhead's comments demonstrate, the idea of mass participation in post - compulsory education, particularly higher education, will continue to be attacked by conservatives. Though we may hold reservations about the nature of the post-16 curriculum, the role of vocational learning and the replacement of thinking skills by what in the age of the 'downloading society' may be no more than an ability to process information, it would be farcical to suggest that even if we as *educators* remain critical of official definitions of the learning society we should not do our best as *practitioners* to make sure that our students are able to continue to fulfil their own personal aspirations within it.

But as long as learning continues to be regarded as a purely instrumental activity then the question of what we say to our students will remain a significant one. The students in the case studies have already started to confront at least some of the contradictions themselves. As the previous chapter has argued, many of these students already have considerable experience of the labour process and in a sense they had become young adults who just happened to still go to school. On numerous occasions as their tutor, but also as someone concerned about their individual welfare, I found myself wanting to give the students advice that ran contrary to the 'official' version from the school. Nowhere was this more evident than on the question of applying for higher education, where students were expected to spend

.hours completing UCAS forms to apply for institutions that in September would invariably be trying to recruit them!

In many ways, the informal knowledge the students had about going on to university as a result of the experience of brothers, sisters and cousins has much in common with the informal understanding 'the lads' in Willis's study had about how the labour market really worked. But arguably, unlike the case with Willis's students, there is more opportunity with students of this age to work through some of the issues about the role of the school in relation to the job market. The more positive relationships between staff and students that exist in post-16 education also opens up the possibility of a more prolonged debate about not only what should be taught and how, but also whether 'another school is possible.'<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> 'Another School is Possible' the theme of the education seminars at the *European Social Forum*, London, October 2004.

## **Appendices**



## **Appendix I - Course specifications and grading in GNVQ.**

Below are examples of the original 1993-94 specifications for Advanced level Business and of the 1995 amendments, unit tests and grading themes.

### **Unit 1 Business in the economy**

#### **1.1 Explain the purposes and products of business**

##### **Performance criteria**

- 1 Demand for goods and services is identified and described
- 2 Demand in relation to particular product is described
- 3 Industrial sectors are identified and described
- 4 The product of businesses in different industrial sectors is identified and described
- 5 Purposes of selected business organisations are explained

##### **Range**

*Demand:* needs, wants and effective demand; consumption and income; demand and price; elastic and inelastic

*Industrial sectors:* primary, secondary, tertiary

*Product:* goods; services

*Purposes:* profit-making; public service; charitable

### **Evidence indicators**

An analysis of selected businesses with an explanation of why businesses exist, an explanation of their product and an explanation of demand in general and demand in relation to a particular product. Evidence should demonstrate understanding of the implications of the range dimensions in relation to the element. The unit test will confirm the candidate's coverage of range.

### **Re-written element September 1995**

#### **1.1 Analyse the forces of supply and demand on business**

##### **Performance Criteria**

A student must:

- 1 Explain **demand** for goods and services
- 2 Explain how businesses decide on goods and services to **supply**
- 3 **Analyse** the **demand** and **supply** interaction
- 4 Explain the **effects on business decisions** of changes in the conditions of demand and supply
- 5 Report research findings about **demand** and **supply** interaction and the price and sales for a particular good
- 6 Suggest future changes in **demand** and **supply** of particular products

### **Evidence indicators<sup>93</sup>**

A report, which analyses two products and explains:

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<sup>93</sup> Evidence indicators were to serve as the basic minimal evidence to be required

- The causes of change in demand and supply for these products. The report should analyse how the interaction of demand and supply influenced business decisions about the two products

- The importance to businesses of the relationship between price, quantity demanded and quantity supplied

- The importance of customers and competitors in terms of their effect on demand, prices, supply and the consequences of shifts in terms of output or sales.

The report should indicate that equilibrium between supply and demand will determine both the price and sales of a particular product and indicate the effects on price and sales of changes in demand and supply. It should suggest possible future changes in demand and supply for the two products. The only form of external assessment for these elements were multi-choice tests in which students were required to get two thirds of their answers correct. Originally the three examination bodies set their own tests these were later to become standardised by NCVQ/QCA

### Examples from the March 2001 end of unit test

An increase in the demand for new cars will NORMALLY cause

- a) price and output to rise
- b) price to rise and output to fall
- c) price to fall and output to rise
- d) price and output to fall

What is the MOST likely impact of a reduction in the general level of income tax?

- a) decrease in employment opportunities
- b) an increase in interest rate
- c) a decrease in business confidence
- d) an increase in disposable income

### Grading Themes

At Advanced level students could receive a grade by demonstrating that a third of their work was either at Merit or Distinction level for each of the grading criteria, the final version of which are included below<sup>94</sup>

#### Theme One     *Drawing up plans of action*

**Merit**     Student independently draws up plan of action for a series of discrete tasks. The plans prioritise the different tasks within the given time period

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<sup>94</sup> source Capey Report

*Distinction* Student independently draws up plans of action for complex activities. The plans prioritise the different tasks within the given time period

***Monitoring courses of action***

*Merit* Student independently identifies points at which monitoring is necessary and recognises where revisions to courses of action are necessary. Appropriate revisions to plans are made with guidance from teacher/tutor

*Distinction* Student independently identifies points at which monitoring is necessary and recognises where revisions to courses of action are necessary. Appropriate revisions to plans are made independently

***Theme Two Information seeking and information handling***

***Identifying and using sources to obtain information***

*Merit Student* independently identifies, accesses and collects relevant information for a series of discrete tasks. Student identifies principle sources independently and additional sources are identified by the teacher tutor

*Distinction* Student independently identifies, accesses and collects relevant information for complex activities. Student uses a range of sources and justifies their selection

*Establishing the validity of information*

**Merit** Student independently identifies information, which requires checking for validity. Student checks validity of information using given methods

**Distinction Student** independently identifies information, which requires checking for validity. Student independently selects and applies appropriate methods for checking validity.

**Theme Three Evaluation**

*Evaluating outcomes and alternatives*

**Merit** Student judges outcomes against original criteria for success, identifies alternative criteria that can be applied in order to judge success of the activities

**Distinction** Student judges outcomes against original criteria for success and identifies and applies a range of alternative criteria in order to judge success of the activities.

*Justifying particular approaches to tasks/activities*

**Merit** Student justifies approach used, indicates that alternatives were identified and considered.

**Distinction** Student justifies approach used, basing justification on a detailed consideration of relative advantages and disadvantages. Alternatives and improvements are identified.

**Theme Four Quality of outcomes**

*Synthesis*

**Merit** Student's work demonstrates an effective synthesis of knowledge, skills and understanding in response to discrete tasks

**Distinction** Student's work demonstrates an effective synthesis of knowledge, skills and understanding in response to complex activities

*Command of 'language'\**

**Merit** Student's work demonstrates an effective command of 'language' of the GNVQ area at Advanced level

**Distinction** Student's work demonstrates a fluent command of 'language' of the GNVQ area at Advanced level.

\* 'Language' refers to the concepts, forms of expression and presentation used within the GNVQ vocational area or discipline.



## **Appendix 2 Specifications and grading in the VCE September 2000**

### **VCE Business Unit I**

The equivalent to the GNVQ Business unit in the VCE is one of the two externally assessed units from the mandatory six. Aspects of the assessment process are included below. As is the case with some GCSE and A-level qualifications students are expected to complete written answers based on pre released case study, with each answer attracting different amounts of marks.

Parts of Unit 1, an internally assessed and externally moderated unit are also included. In contrast to the general grading themes in the earlier version of the GNVQ, the assessment sheet that accompanies this unit shows what students are expected to demonstrate if they want to reach either grade E, grade C or grade A for the unit.

**To achieve a grade E you must show you can:**

**E1** classify the business according to its product or service.

**E2** describe and explain the objectives of the business

**E3** describe the functional areas that exist in the business, and explain how they help

The business to meet its objectives

**E4** describe the management styles and cultures present within the business

**E5** identify communication channels used by the business

**E6** explain how the production process and quality assurance/ control system used by

the business helps it to add value to its product or service.

**To achieve a grade C you must also show you can:**

**C1** make judgments about how successfully the business is meeting its objectives

**C2** explain how the organizational structure, culture and management style of the business affects its performance and operation and helps it to meet its objectives

**C3** understand the impact of ICT on internal and external communications of the business ownership, and explain the benefits and constraints of this type of ownership.

### Appendix 3 - *Curriculum 2000* and the qualifications framework

	Academic	Vocational	Key Skills	Occupational Equivalents
<b>Level 3 Advanced</b>  <i>Curriculum 2000</i>	<b>GCE Year 2 A2- 3units</b>  <b>Year 1 A/S- 3 units</b>	<b>VCE 12 -unit (double award)</b>  <b>6-unit VCE</b>  <b>3 -unit (AS equivalent)</b>	<b>Communication</b>  <b>Application of Number</b>  <b>Information Technology</b>  <i>Wider skills</i> Improving own learning Problem solving Working together	<b>NVQ Level 3</b>
<b>Level 2 Intermediate</b>	<b>GCSE Grades A-C</b>	<b>Intermediate GNVQ</b>	<b>Key Skills level 2</b>	<b>NVQ Level 2</b>
<b>Level 1 Foundation</b>	<b>GCSE Grades D-G</b>	<b>Foundation GNVQ</b>	<b>Key Skills level 1</b>	<b>NVQ Level 1</b>
<b>Entry level</b>			<b>Basic Skills qualifications</b>	

## Appendix 4 - Student Questionnaire

Example of a questionnaire given to both groups of GNVQ students towards the end of their first year. This was used to collect basic information about the sample. Both groups also took part in group taped discussions.

Age.....

Male/ female

Would you call yourself working or middle class, or do class distinctions not mean anything these days?

Which course/courses are you following?

Tell us briefly about your educational history so far including the types of qualifications you have gained.

Which ethnic or national group would you say you belonged to?

What sort of work do your parents do? (Give the job title and/or their employer if you can).

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Why did you choose this course? Look at the list of possible reasons below, write down whether it was important and say why. You might like to include something about the following as well as adding other reasons.

*I'm interested in a particular career and this course teaches me things that will help*

*I knew people on it last year who said it was OK*

*My friends were doing it. A relative had done it*

*Teachers advised me to*

*Parents advised me to/or made me stay at the school rather than go to college*

*I didn't have the right qualifications to do another one*

*I did an Intermediate course in this subject and it seemed 'normal' to continue at Advanced level*

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Do you like being in the sixth form? Did you consider going to college instead? If so why didn't you?

Do you take part in any of the sixth form social activities such as discos or debates? (give examples) Do you pay much attention to things like the Sixth Form Council?

Which courses do your closest friends do?  
Do you have a part-time job at the moment?

If so tell us something about it, (for example, what is it? Who you work for? How long do you work and when? How much you are paid?)

If not, are you looking for one? Have you had one recently? Why did you leave?

What sort of people do you work with? Are they students? Are they other people working part-time?

Would you consider working for your employer full time after you have completed your studies? (maybe in another position?) Has anyone at work tried to persuade you to?

Have you ever taken time off school because you have had to go to work? Do you think your job interferes with your studies?

Would you give it up if your teacher or parents were convinced that it was affecting your studies?

What do you spend your money you earn from work on? Do you save any of it, or give it to your parents?

What sort of work do you want to do when you finish your education? Why? How does the course you are doing improve your chances of getting this sort of work?

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If you are planning on going on to higher education what do you want to try and study, where and why? (You should comment on some of the following factors, but also add others if you want).

Interesting course

Social life

Get away from your parents

Close to home /easy to get to

I couldn't afford to leave home and move away

I already know people there

How will you finance your three years in higher education? Will you try and keep your current job/get another one?

Has the abolition of student grants and the introduction of tuition fees made you think twice about university? (If it has, in what ways?)

What are your views on student loans and having to pay towards your fees? What do your parents think about these?

If you are not intending to apply for university or college say why not?

Where do you see yourself in five/ten years time? (You can include things about employment/social life/family etc).

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The A-level students from Anglia and Inner London completed a slightly modified version of this.

## **Appendix 5 - An alternative.**

This statement has been drafted by a group of NUT and NATFHE members, who work in school sixth forms, FE colleges, universities and adult education. The group was set up at the conference on 'Education Beyond 16' organised by the NATFHE General Education Section in December 97. The final version of the statement was written by Colin Waugh and Martin Allen and was published in the journal *Education and Social Justice Vol. 1 Number 1*.

### **Towards real lifelong learning**

This statement deals with education and training beyond 16, whether conducted in school, sixth forms, sixth form colleges, tertiary colleges, FE colleges, universities, adult education, training schemes or ordinary workplaces. How can we bring into existence a form of provision that is under democratic control and which will improve opportunities for the majority to plan improve and extend their own learning?

Up until now the rich and powerful have shaped provision. Big business has refused to fund the education and training of workers properly; the older universities have continued to impose their agenda across all levels and sectors. The resulting set up produces restricted groups of specialists loyal to the status quo, divides those who depend on wages or benefits against one another, and marginalises vital forms of knowledge, understanding and skill.

Developments over the last few years have brought this long-standing pattern to a crisis. We now have: competition within institutions, within sectors; and between sectors, even though they often wish to cooperate; management accountable to neither the public nor to shareholders; corruption; reduced choice of courses; waste alongside shortages of resources; loss of jobs alongside staff shortages; poor provision alongside talk about quality; casualisation and agency staff; worsened conditions and pay; lack of planning: under funding; inequality between sector; young people shut out from the labour market proper yet forced to take casual jobs: pressure on people to become students alongside restrictions on their doing so: a drive to create a mass higher education system coupled with a drive to turn people from poorer backgrounds away from HE by threatening them with debt; prestigious research-based universities for the few at the top and cash-starved ex-polys or franchised HE in FE for the majority at the bottom: a continuing academic/vocational divide; skill shortages alongside unemployment.

Although some of the steps announced by the Government are to be welcomed, the shelving of the Life Long Learning White Paper shows that they will not tackle the real problems, and other aspects of their policies indicate that Blair intends to carry Thatcher's policies further than Major could. We need to construct an alternative agenda if we are to create a democratic learning society

Our alternative must start with the interaction between teachers and students and pose the question 'What sort of teaching and learning do the majority of people really need?' At post-16 the curriculum is still dominated by A-levels - a qualification designed to further the interests of a small minority and, despite changes forced



through by practitioners, still reflecting a narrow conception of learning favoured by elitist institutions. While A-levels continue to exist, 'vocational' education will never be equal in status, despite Dearing's tinkering. We call for a new qualification structure, which guarantees entitlement to a broad general education and also allows specialisation. In the meantime, we would want to campaign for the complete modularisation of existing A-level and GNVQ courses to allow students to make choices that cut across 'pathways' without prejudice. Such a curriculum would also be supported by a common assessment system both accessible to students, rather than driven by the needs of external testing.

### **Key Skills**

We should seek to develop Key Skills into a core of general education, which is realised through all forms of provision, whether academic, vocational or occupational. The exact detail of how this should be done - of how far, for example, it needs to be embodied in distinctive subject matter of its own such as 'Understanding Work and the World'- can only be the product of dialogue between teachers and learners. Therefore we must defend this against the continued drive to cut it. So while we criticise such course structures as A-levels and GNVQ we must nevertheless defend them against the drive to increase the ratio of students to teachers, replace taught hours with resource-based learning, recruit staff via agencies rather than employ them on stable contracts and drive down time available for preparation. We must not only demand more money for post-16 provision but also demand that both

the existing money and that additional money be distributed on a different basis from hitherto.

Resources locked up in the most prestigious universities and the training side of professions such as medicine or the law must be released for the mass of F&HE and Adult Education students. The income from shares, property etc, held by for example, Oxbridge colleges ought to be distributed across the whole of post-16 provision. Secondly, the state must require firms by law to participate in a levy/grant system for the provision of training.

Thirdly, the salary structures of institutions such as FE colleges must be altered to release the money currently being wasted on salaries and perks for top managers. Fourthly, there should be new methods for regulating services to stop firms, for example publishers, computer manufacturers, caterers, security firms and builders, making excessive profits from post-16 provision. The funding released from these sources and from profits more generally should be allocated to providers on the basis of need as assessed by democratic organisations –using, for example, such indicators as how many people are unemployed in a given area. It should be at a level which would ensure that every region could meet the needs of all those wishing to study and to undertake research.

### **Needs**

However, these measurers would be useless unless provision itself were to be re-organised so as to be driven by need. This should be done by drawing together all the

institutions that are currently fighting one another - the sixth forms, the colleges, the private trainers, the universities, the TECs - so that they form a single, comprehensive, non competing, post compulsory education and training infrastructure in each region.

Each region should be required by law to provide the full range of courses, subjects, modes of attendance etc within a broad curriculum framework set by the state. This would mean that each region would cover several LEAs.

Control by an inter-LEA consortium would be possible, but the best way to abolish the quangos and ensure democratic control would be for each regional board to be accountable to and elected by people in the area. They would then be responsible for how the money was spent. They would oversee the appointment of senior staff in each part of the system. The fact that those at the top were thus democratically accountable would of itself lead to the erosion of the culture of bullying and autocracy that has developed in institutions and its replacement by more sensible approaches.

The boards would also be required by their terms of reference to ensure that the content of what is taught and learnt across the system, the means used for teaching and learning it, the assessment procedures and the qualifications awarded, met the needs of those they represented. The obligation would also rest with them to ensure that progression routes into, through and out of the system were clear.

Each board would therefore need to set up a forum or standing conference on these issues, and at the same time to liase with other boards concerning them, for example to ensure currency of qualifications across regions.

There could be a legal requirement that such regional curricular and assessment forums draw together representatives from LEAs unions from both within and outside education, community groups and students - as well as employers and universities as now.

Within such forums, the study content of all qualification routes should be modularised so as to maximise the possibility of part-time study and credit accumulation. Assessment should be criterion referenced and every module –whether ‘academic’, ‘vocational’ or ‘occupational’ should be specified in terms of minimum proportions of knowledge, understanding and skill. All whole qualifications should include a core of thinking and organisation and a properly funded system of moderation would replace external testing.

Students would retain the right to study outside their home region. The development of such regional forums would be likely to lead eventually to the emergence of regional awarding and validating bodies, superseding the existing national bodies such as Edexcel, City & Guilds etc on the one hand and the Open Colleges on the other. While remaining answerable in each case to their elected authority these could also form national or even international networks.

## **Government**

The outline we have sketched here would, however, be workable only on condition that the Government tackled the underlying market issues.

These are the central feature underlying the present chaotic and dysfunctional arrangements. Welfare to Work is not an answer to these problems but rather a

strategy for introducing US-style workfare and finally dismantling what is left of the welfare state. But without the restoration of full employment neither our proposals for post-16 education nor any other proposals for cleaning up the mess across education and training can work.

The Government should therefore institute a big programme of public works, which could include such measures as restoration of the water and sewage system, the construction of an integrated transport system, regeneration of the public owned housing stock and measures to tackle pollution. Other measures would include restoring proper staffing levels to the public services and devising new services to meet new needs. Within such a context it would then be possible to offer every unemployed person, including 16-19 year olds, voluntary employment on public works at union rates with training. All bureaucratic restrictions on study while on benefits should be abolished and the right to benefit should be restored to everybody over 16. Those who choose to study full time should receive a living grant and those in private employment opting to study part-time should receive a state allowance (when not supported by the employer) for doing so.

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\*References to various material issued to schools and colleges by QCA and DfES sponsored agencies and to internal reports by the National Union of Teachers have been included as footnotes. References to material that has been collected from websites have also been listed as footnotes. Titled newspaper articles have been included as references.

*Inner London and Anglia students : Great Yarmouth June 2000*

